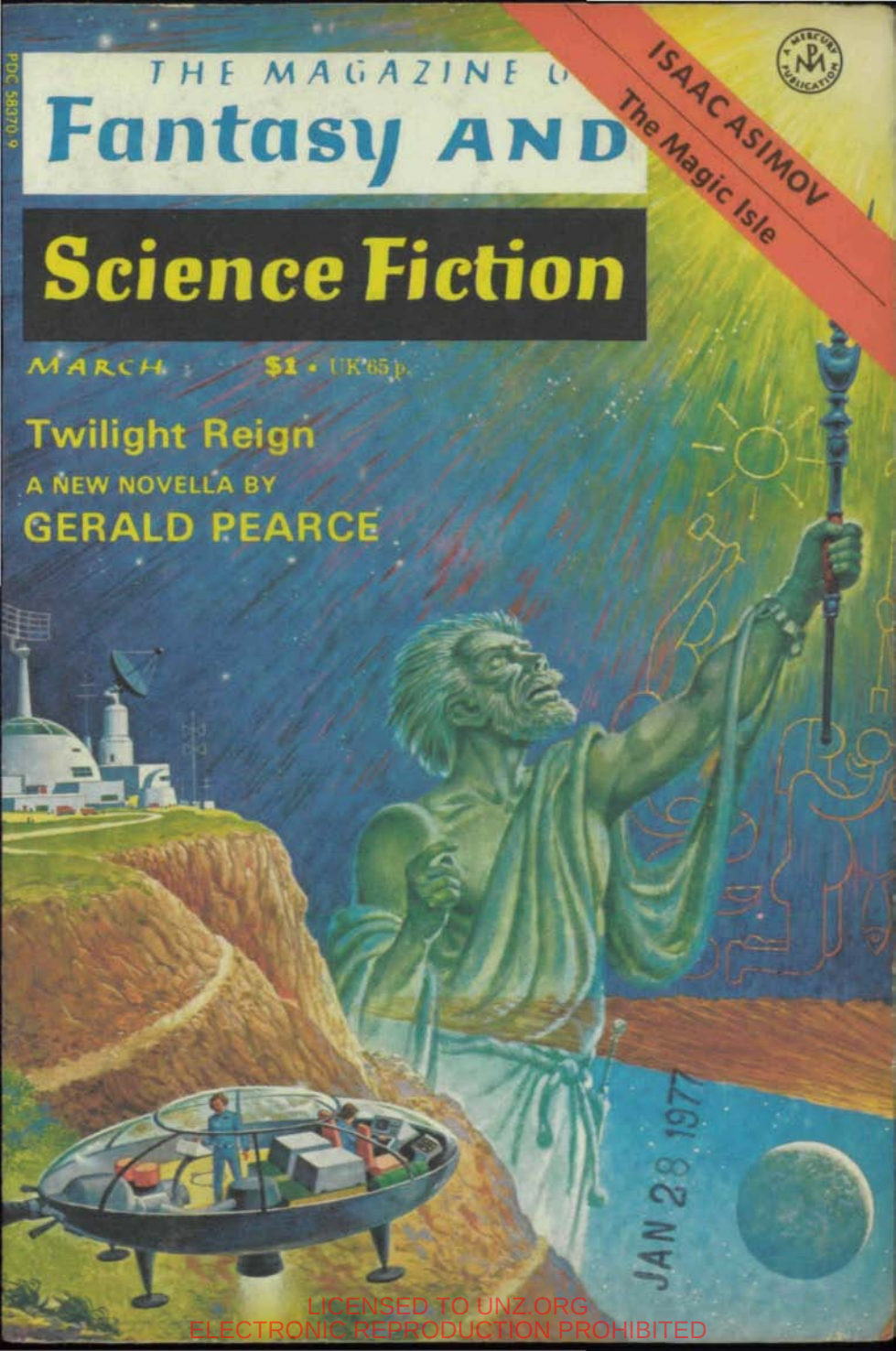

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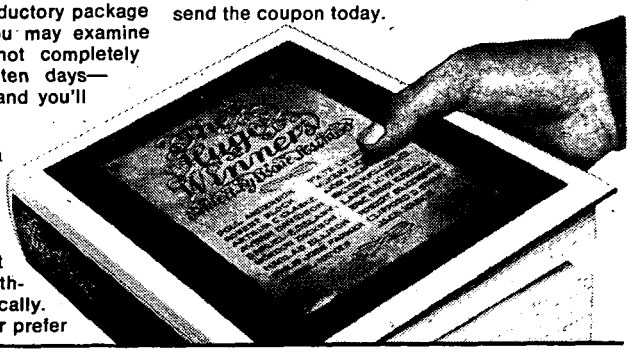

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Phyllis Eisenstein [known to F&SF readers for her Alaric stories] here collaborates with her husband to offer a faultlessly executed and ultimately chilling new story about a dedicated young priest who experiences some disquieting dreams and begins a search for an explanation.

Altar Ego

by PHYLLIS and ALEX EISENSTEIN

The deep leather chair was comfortable, but Father Kirkwood could not relax. He looked at the walls, at the books, at the framed diploma over the desk, anywhere but at the doctor. He had never visited a psychiatrist before. He had never heard of another priest doing so in any but a professional capacity.

"Of course, Bishop Martin has discussed your problem with me," said Dr. Loomis. He was a small, bald man in a brown suit, and his round face bore a carefully cultivated look of cordial neutrality. "But I want you to talk to me as if you had just walked in off the street; assume no foreknowledge on my part." He folded his hands under his chin.

Kirkwood's fingers shifted restlessly on the padded arms of his chair. "I've asked for guidance." His face was calm, but his eyes were pouchy and red. "The truth is within me, I know, but I haven't been able to discover it myself." He gazed down at the rug. "I have... disturbing dreams." The doctor nodded slightly, encouragingly; Kirkwood caught the gesture at the edge of his vision. "Not ordinary nightmares, nothing like childhood dreams, anyway."

"Even so, their roots could lie in early experience," Loomis replied. "Why don't you start by sketching in your background for me?"

The priest hesitated. "I was a foundling."

He was abandoned at the threshold of St. Henry's in the time of prosperity preceding the Great Depression. On the night of Candlemas in 1928, the assistant priest stepped outside to clear the snow from the door before evening Mass. Plying his shovel briskly, Father Jerome pushed aside a battered carton of rags and was

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immediately greeted by a sharp wail. At first he thought it was the cry of a cat in heat, but a moment's investigation of the box exposed a newborn's red, contorted face. He let the shovel fall and scooped the bundle, carton and all, into his arms. In the light spilling from the open doorway, he saw that the rags were soaked with fresh blood, and a sticky red film covered the infant's head and torso. Jerome rushed the baby over to the nursing sister at the adjacent orphanage; she clucked anxiously over the child as she cleaned him, but, to her great relief, she found no wounds.

The doctor also found nothing amiss; the police, however, discovered a bloody trail in the snow. They followed the spoor, but lost it in the brambles of the nearby woods. The rags revealed nothing of the child's parentage, nor was there any note included among them. The case remained open and unsolved for some time, and then it, too, was abandoned.

The child remained nameless for only a short while. Sister Cecilia, the nurse, stood as godmother at his baptism and chose to call him Stephen, after one of her favorite saints. His godfather Jerome assented; so Stephen he became, and a Smith among myriad Smiths, courtesy of a dull-witted county clerk. Later, when he was old enough to care, he would change the surname to something more distinctive.

By age seven, Stephen seemed an average child, boisterous sometimes, inclined to melancholy behavior at others. Generally, he was obedient and sweet-tempered toward his elders and a leader among his peers. By the time he entered parochial school, he had been told he was a foundling. In first grade, he encountered other children who, unlike his fellows in the orphanage, lived at home with their parents. Some of his friends, undergoing the same experience and learning to read their first words, like "mother" and "father," would brood over their forlorn status; they questioned the nuns, even threw tantrums in their anguish — but Stephen accepted his lot serenely.

"I see my father in my dreams," he told Sister Cecilia.

She patted him on the hand. "God is your only father now, Stephen. He is everyone's father."

Stephen gazed up at her, his dark eyes wide in a small face. "He was tall, and he smiled at me and said not to worry, that everything would be all right."

She nodded. "Any everything *will* be all right, Stephen." She hugged him, for he was her favorite of all the orphans.

"He gave me to the church, Sister. It was he that left me on the steps."

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She cocked her head to one side and smiled sadly. "Perhaps it was, Stephen." She smoothed back his hair. "Perhaps it was."

As young as possible, he became an altar boy. "This is where I belong," he told Father Jerome as he donned the voluminous garments of the office. "I'm going to stay here for the rest of my life."

He grew tall and serious and devout. When his duties in the church were done, he would return to stand by the communion rail and stare at the altar for long hours, meditating. During the war, when the church was more crowded, he would glance up from his preoccupation and gaze out over the sea of bent heads — and he knew that someday he would stand at the altar, guiding their prayers.

Father Jerome, now pastor, was proud of his altar boy, but he felt strongly that Stephen should go out into the world before making any decision about the priesthood. At his insistence, Stephen began to search for a job the day after he graduated from high school. It was a bad time for job hunting, especially for an inexperienced teenager. The war had just ended, and thousands of soldiers were coming home to jobs that the law had reserved for them. The workers who had held those jobs temporarily were now looking for new ones. Stephen walked many miles, and Father Jerome made numerous telephone calls on his behalf. At last he found a position as clerk in a neighborhood grocery store; there he shelved stock, watered vegetables, learned to operate a cash register. The pay was wretched, yet he gave half of it to the church, as a tangible token to recompense for preserving and nurturing him. Too old for the orphanage now, he rented a small room in a Catholic household not far from the church. He worked twelve hours a day, knelt in the first pew another two or three, and thought at great length about the future. After a year in the grocery, he went to Father Jerome again, spoke long and earnestly of his desire to serve. Just before the nineteenth anniversary of his abandonment, Stephen entered the seminary.

He was an excellent student, and his high grades were a source of secret pride to his godparents. He was enthralled by theology and comparative religion, and would spend many evenings in the library, after completing his regular studies, researching additional topics. He questioned his instructors past their ability to answer; they referred him to more seasoned faculty members and thence to restricted volumes, so long unused that dust lay thick upon their spines. The learned essays resulting from these investigations were com-

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mended for their thorough and methodical approach. His academic career progressed steadily through the seven degrees of holy orders, from acolyte through deacon to final ordination. Most of his classmates assumed he would continue his studies, ultimately joining the faculty of some prestigious Catholic university; he surprised them all by requesting assignment to a local parish.

"I am a scholar because that pleases me," he said to the bishop who had laid hands upon his head, who anointed him and blessed him, "but my goal is to serve at the altar. I feel that is my proper place."

The bishop smiled. "St. Henry's seemed quite agreeable to my suggestion."

The building boom of the postwar years had reached his home parish; the woodlands were rapidly disappearing, giving way to new cottages, stores, bars, and restaurants. The church, too, was expanding. Most prominent among its additions was the new orphanage of white concrete and glass, erected since Stephen's last visit. Viewing it critically, he decided the severe modernism of its lines clashed with the old red brick on the rest of the grounds.

Sister Cecilia was in the nursery, and when she saw her godson, she laid down the freshly diapered youngster she had been dandling and turned to hug Stephen in her ample arms. Together, they went into the church to find Father Jerome; and the two priests stood in silence for a moment, one young and one old, one dark-haired and one pepper-gray; then they grinned at each other like a pair of schoolboys.

"When do you want to celebrate your first Mass?" asked Father Jerome.

"Any time. I'm ready whenever you want me."

"You've been ready since you were twelve."

Stephen fingered his clerical collar. "This coming Sunday?"

Jerome clapped him on the shoulder. "Come, we'll get you settled in."

Walking through the nave of the church, Stephen felt glad to be home. The years at the seminary suddenly seemed unreal, part of another life — he had always been here, at the altar of St. Henry's, always in these quiet aisles. No longer the leader of children's games, the altar boy, the favorite of priest and sisters... now he had a new position, and he was content. The black suit and white collar, the many-colored vestments, the chalice and ciborium — these formed the world for which he had long striven, the world he would inhabit the rest of his life.

His duties were manifold,

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encompassing beloved ritual of candle, cloth, and cleanliness; wafer, wine, water, and oil. Father Jerome was the master, yet in the burgeoning parish he passed on many tasks to Stephen — morning Masses, baptisms, some weddings. The confessional was Jerome's preference — he felt that Stephen's youth and inexperience ill-qualified him for that service. On busy days, however, each of them would occupy a wooden booth, and the parishioners readily accepted the new dispenser of absolution. All were friendly to Stephen, whom many had known from school or from his devotion as altar boy, and a number of residents, both new and old, came during his first week at St. Henry's to receive the singular blessing of a freshly ordained priest.

Two satisfying years filled with organ music and Latin sonority had passed when the dreams began. He was bewildered at first, did not know where or who he was, only that he was running naked through snowy woodlands, crystal-coated branches grazing his body, icicles snapping against his skin, yet he felt no cold. Bright moonlight mingled with falling flakes, and the white crust underfoot crunched with his brisk and agile pace. He ran tirelessly, without effort, knowing neither goal nor origin. Was he hunter or hunted, fleeing danger or rushing toward conquest... or did he run merely for the joy of feeling the sharp wind on his flanks, the crisp air in his lungs? He woke breathless, his heart pounding, his limbs trembling, his sheets and pillow drenched with sweat.

A hot shower stilled his shaking, and fresh sheets made a cosy nest for the remainder of the night; by morning he had almost forgotten the odd, intense dream. Nor would he have dwelled on it, except that it recurred two nights later, then the next night, and the night after. At last he thought he recognized those woods — they had been cleared for postwar construction. As a child, he had played among those trees, in that snow... though never at night. He smiled at his unconscious mind, dredging up his childhood so insistently. Walking by the houses that supplanted those groves, he realized that he regretted the loss. He sighed; he was an advocate of progress, but he acknowledged that a small part of him could yield to nostalgia. The dream-woods faded not long after that, and the normal, muddled sleep of a young priest returned.

Two months later, he was running again.

He was a smooth-coated stag this time, his antlers still in velvet, and the spring air was heavy with the rich scent of pollen. The woods

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surrounded him once more, but woods grown vast, the trees huge and ancient, their vaulting crowns densely interlaced against the sky. He ran swift and sure over moss and herb, breaking through heavy brambles, and little creatures scurried for shelter from under his crashing hooves. He bounded up a steep rocky incline, emerging from foliage at the crest of a high hill, where he paused to survey the world. The sun was sinking in a red glower to the west, and shadows lay deep upon the forest, which spread out below him, across rolling hills and shallow valleys, where streams of silver coursed with a muted glitter. The forest stretched to the horizon and beyond — even, as the pulse in his veins whispered, unto the weathered mountains that slumped like sleeping giants in the distance of forever. Upon the near slope of one of those mountains, his preternatural eyes picked out a milky flash. He felt the muscles of his hips and shoulders tense, and then he was leaping downward, diving into the forest once more, in avid pursuit....

He woke unable to recall the nature of his quarry, though its identity had seemed clear enough during the dream. The greater his effort to remember, the more elusive the whole episode became, and by noon he was no longer sure of what he had seen, what he had done. He was sure only that being a stag was an extraordinary experience. That night, he knew it again.

Once again he chased the white flash, and once again he knew his quarry, knew it instinctively, without attribution of name or shape. And once again, when he woke, he could not claim that knowledge. After several weeks, he thought he was catching up to it, that at last he would glimpse its true form — but then the dreams ceased.

He wandered down to the lake, through a narrow parkland of sparse trees; he sat on a green bench, lost in rumination. He was sorry the dreams were gone because he found them fascinating, like an endlessly repetitious movie serial, and he wanted to know what happened in the final chapter. Yet he had a strong inkling that they would come again, that his unconscious mind had more to say about forests and running. He also felt a vague foreboding — he didn't like his mind playing tricksy with him, so totally beyond his direct control, as if at the whim of another person. He determined to set the matter aside for now. He could not afford to waste his time on nonsense.

He returned to the church.

Morning Mass was usually his own bailiwick, Father Jerome preferring to sleep late. Attendance was younger than at later celebrations — high school and college

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students on their way to class, young workers headed for their jobs; the ardent young priest drew them. Stephen knew the faces of the regular worshipers, and he greeted them individually whenever time permitted. Most occupied the same pews every day; like the group of young women who sat in the second row. Stephen began to think of these early risers as *his* flock, and when he saw one of them later in the day, coming in to light a candle or just to meditate for a while, he would wait an appropriate length of time and then approach with a quiet salutation. A few people came in often, seemed to spend most of their spare time in church, as he had done when a boy, and he wondered if any of them felt as he had.

One young woman — one of the group that sat in the second row — often stopped in between 5:30 and 6:00 in the evening; Stephen noticed her because he chose that time for his own meditation. After genuflecting, she would walk halfway down the center aisle and sit on an end seat, hands folded and eyes directed toward the altar. She never stayed long. Once a week, though, she would enter the confessional, and the little light above the door would go on, signaling Stephen to hurry over and take his place. This period was one of the regular confession hours established by the parish, but few people used the opportunity. He listened to her scant sins: anger; pride; envy — all so minor that he marveled at her scrupulousness. He assigned a small penance, and when sometimes she seemed disappointed with it, he would caution her against overzealousness. Still, he could not help wishing that some of his other parishioners would attend confession as faithfully.

He wasn't supposed to know who was on the other side of the screen, but of course it was often impossible not to. He knew their voices, their mannerisms, their usual sins, the names of their relatives and their employers — all the gossip of the Catholic neighborhood and some of the rest as well. As a priest he kept it all sealed inside him, not even discussing it with Jerome unless it were common knowledge, and he did his best to give his Christian love impartially to them all. No one parisioner was more important to him than any other; no one was more welcome in the church or in his presence; all required his attention, and all received equally of his solace, to the fullest of Stephen's priestly ability.

All save this one; her name was Caroline.

The difference was not immense, but it was real. Stephen could hardly admit this breach to himself at first; yet when she

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entered the church, his eyes sought her out, lingered on her face and form a scant second or so, even though he stood at the altar. And her voice he recognized more quickly than any other when she begged her weekly absolution. Her image often drifted into his reveries, only to be pushed hastily from his mind... but still she was there, on the periphery, and Stephen assured himself that her great devotion was all that pleased him.

And then the third round of dreams began.

Forest summer now, a sultry moonlit night, leaves glossy green and heavy on the boughs. He ran once more, a man now, light-footed, the undergrowth lush and springy beneath his naked feet. Something weighed upon his skull — perhaps an ungainly helm of some sort — but he never thought to reach up and cast it off. He was intent only on the quarry ahead, and nothing deterred him from the chase — not the branches that buffeted his shaggy torso nor the tangled roots that threatened his ankles... nor the squat boulders that loomed in his path, nor the torrents that cut across it and pummeled his thighs. Among the further trees he glimpsed her, white-skinned, clad in leafy vines, blooms of daffodil and morning glory twining in her hair, cloaking her fine breasts and supple loins. Multicolored petals fluttered in the air as she fled, and with them a waft of pungent perfume.

She broke free of the forest and paused in a large clearing to gaze back at him, and when he spied her face, he froze with the shock of recognition. She smiled, her wet lips parting slowly, then darted across the deep grass and into the fern-choked woods. Now he knew he could catch her, that she was waiting for him to follow, that she would not run far or fast. Yet he did not move, but looked up at the bright round moon overhead.

And awoke.

He remembered the nature of the quarry only too clearly — Caroline.

The church was dark and silent when he went out among the pews to sit and ponder. He understood the message of this dream and fervently wished to deny it. He was celibate and had been satisfied with that condition. He felt no erotic yearnings in the coarse of his daily routine; no lustful daydreams plagued him. The pleasures of the flesh were only of clinical interest to him... this he told himself, and this he believed. He prayed some small time, then put the bold dream out of his mind and prepared for morning Mass.

She was there, prominent in the second row: a tall young woman of pleasing proportion and pleasant,

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almost idyllic countenance. She smiled at him, and he smiled back rather wanly before deliberately shifting his gaze. That evening, he dispensed with his customary hour in the church, taking a long walk instead, to meditate by the lake rather than before the altar. He returned to his bed in a mood of deep confusion.

The dream recurred, but it seemed to him this time that the chase was longer, the quarry closer, the hunt nearer conclusion. Once again the sight of the full moon at zenith woke him. This time he went to his window and looked out at the real moon, a gibbous disk; he leaned on the windowsill with straight, stiff arms, his mind and body going numb. After some minutes of grating indecision, he woke Father Jerome to tell him that he could not celebrate Mass that morning.

"Not well, Stephen?"

He shook his head, unable to speak the truth, unwilling to lie. "Please, Father."

Jerome sensed something amiss in his godson. "Very well, we'll speak later," he answered and asked no more.

Before the crucifix in his room, Stephen prayed for guidance. He had been weak in shirking the Mass, and he abhorred that weakness. All his life he thought he knew himself, but now he only knew his mind was not his own, that he was ruled by drives that could not be reconciled with his avowed desires. He searched himself repeatedly but no longer trusted what he found. After the Mass, he went to Jerome and confessed the dream and its procursors.

Jerome's inquiry centered on Stephen's conscious preoccupation with the dreams and with Caroline, but Stephen continued to dwell on the dreams themselves.

"I feel... all of this is beyond my control."

Jerome laid a hand on his godson's shoulder. "Stephen, such dreams are not unusual, not even for a priest. Your cassock cannot shield you from all temptations of the flesh. You know that your real sin lies in allowing these matters to occupy so much of your waking thoughts."

Stephen sighed. "Of course, you're right."

"Is there anything further?"

Stephen shook his head.

"For penance, then, one decade of the Rosary."

"Nothing more?"

Jerome looked stern for a moment. "For overzealousness... one additional Our Father."

Stephen nodded, abashed.

"Also, I'll say the morning Mass for a while."

"I don't want to run away, Father!"

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Jerome paused before answering. "God will indulge you a brief vacation."

Stephen slumped in his chair, unsure of how this new development helped ameliorate his dilemma.

He stayed awake late that night, reading, praying, kneeling by the window to watch the moon move slowly across the night sky. He dreaded sleep but knew there was no escape from it. At last, when his head began to throb from exhaustion and his knees ached with cramp, he lay down on his bed, fully clothed, his hands folded about the crucifix on his Rosary. The familiar dream enveloped him immediately — the ceaseless chase. He ran till the midday sun woke him, blazing through the window... the quarry still just beyond his grasp.

He rose stiffly, showered and changed to fresh clothing. He said a decade of the Rosary and felt more comfortable. He determined to put the dream out of his mind and turn to his new, abbreviated schedule — a luncheon meeting of the Holy Name Society, a mixed-religion wedding ceremony, confessions, cleansing. His days were still full, and if his nights ended in shaking, sweating wakefulness, he pretended they were calm. Father Jerome noticed the dark circles under his godson's eyes but said nothing.

As before, this dream also faded; the forest became tenuous and vague, the quarry nebulous. One morning he woke and did not know if he had dreamed at all. He sighed, turned over, and went back to sleep.

Stephen regained his cheerful demeanor; the carnal urges within him had, he supposed, dissipated their energies. He requested morning Mass once more, and Father Jerome, observing a fresh repose in his young assistant, gave it over gladly.

Stephen had scarcely begun the *Kyrie* when he realized that Caroline was not in her accustomed seat, although her erstwhile companions were present. Mentally he shrugged, certain that his concern now was only for her spiritual welfare.

Later that day, he went out for a stroll, heading toward the lake for his hour of meditation. He greeted the people who passed him on the street — the young women with baby carriages, the grandmothers with shopping bags, the children with towels rolled under their arms, bound home after a day at the beach. Some pedestrians were strangers, merely passing through the neighborhood; some wore the sigils of another religion, but he greeted them all with the same expansive smile. He felt at peace with himself.

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An asphalt path wound through the tame greenery of the park, and he ambled blindly along it. After a while he thought he heard footsteps behind him. Lost in his private thoughts, he ignored the sound at first, but when it persisted for many minutes, he turned curiously to see who else might be following this path down to the lake shore.

Caroline.

When she saw him look back, she abruptly halted, then wheeled sharply to her right and struck off across the grass.

He stared after her briefly, then resumed his previous direction. When he looked back again, she was gone.

At Mass the following morning, she was in her usual place. He was pleased to see her back in church but disturbed by the way she eyed him during the whole celebration. Later, she walked past him when she left, though it was not a direct route to the door. She said nothing, merely gazed at him with a nervous half-smile on her lips. He smiled back, his pleasant, public, priestly smile.

"It happens sometimes," said Father Jerome, "that a female parishioner will think she's falling in love with a priest, especially if the priest is young and handsome." He leaned back in his chair and regarded Stephen with raised eyebrows. "You can't very well make yourself old and ugly, can you?"

"I must have noticed her interest," Stephen replied. "That's why she was in my dream."

Jerome shrugged. "That's a reasonable conjecture."

"But... what do I do?"

"About her?"

"Yes."

"There's nothing you can do. Without encouragement, her interest will flag and she'll find some available young man to occupy her time; she's pretty enough. All you need do is wait her out."

"All right."

"Any other problems?"

"No, Father." Stephen grinned. "No dreams; everything is fine."

The weather turned balmy at summer's end, a long, lazy autumn, and Stephen spent much of his spare time outdoors, playing softball with a group of boys on the diamond behind the orphanage. The fresh, cool air, the children's shouts and laughter, the physical exertion, all combined to make his spirits soar. He rededicated himself to the service of God and Man.

He did not see Caroline for a long time. At morning Mass, his eyes merely skimmed the crowd, without registering many faces. He guessed she was in her regular seat, but thought better than to check, lest she notice his attention. He had resumed his evening vigils in the church soon after the incident by

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the lake, and since then she had not stopped into church at that hour. Devout as she was, with her penchant for confessing trivia, he assumed she must be coming at some time when Jerome was on duty — and Stephen felt that was best for everyone. He was not expecting to hear her voice after several other familiar ones had already droned out their sins and received their penance.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned, and it has been two months since my last confession. I have... I have felt desire for a priest."

His throat constricted at the sound of that voice, at those words, and he could make no reply. It was out in the open now, dread replacing calm forgetfulness — it was in the confessional, between them, surrounding them. He folded his hands, and the knuckles showed white with strain.

She continued in a tone barely audible. "I've had these dreams, Father. Over and over again, I don't know how often — it's months now since they started. They're always the same. I... I see him. He's naked, following me through the park. Sometimes I'm naked, too. I'm running away... only I'm not, really. I don't want to run away; I want him to catch me. I know him, I know he's a priest, but it doesn't matter. I want to give myself to you — to *him!*" A sharply indrawn breath and a long, ear-splitting pause; her voice quavered when she spoke again. "Well, there's my dream, Father; there it is."

He spoke with difficulty. "And how... how do you feel on waking?"

He heard her shift in her seat on the other side of the screen. "The same," she murmured.

He sat in silence — both of them sat in silence — for an eternity of heavy heartbeats, and then he said, in a low even tone, "You must renounce this illicit passion, my child. It can never be returned."

Her voice was very close to the screen when she spoke again, and he laid his hand against the cloth, irrationally, to keep the opening sealed against her presence. "I understand, Father."

"For your penance, you will come to the church to hear Father Jerome celebrate Mass on Sunday evenings for the next month."

"Yes, Father."

"You will also say five Hail Marys, two Our Fathers, and an Act of Contrition, and you will pray to our Blessed Mother to turn your heart in more appropriate directions."

"Yes, Father."

He listened to her leave the confessional, and only then did he lift his hand away from the cloth. Someone else came in — a man of

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the neighborhood — and made his own confession, and Stephen succeeded in devoting his attention to that matter.

He lay awake upon his bed that night, listening to the wind whisk crackling dead leaves against his window. He believed he had met the problem and put it behind him. He felt drained, both physically and emotionally, yet it was hours before he finally lapsed into sleep.

Sleep, the gateway to dream life. Once more the full moon rode at his back, but now there was no running. He stood before a gigantic gnarled and fluted oak; he was naked, and between his legs a large erection throbbed with his rapid pulse. Glistening with oil, Caroline lay pinioned against the tree, bound to it by ivy. Her legs were splayed along two thick, arching roots, her torso resting upon their juncture. Head thrown back, her long hair in wild disarray, she gazed upon him in mad and fearful....

Supplication?

Thrust into the earth between her thighs was a polished oaken staff that gleamed in the moonlight; its knobby top, roughly finished like a cudgel, protruded at her crotch, as if supporting part of her weight. He grasped the staff, his fingers close against her warmth, and wrenched it upward. The wood slid along her tender flesh with a sound like a sword being drawn from its sheath.

When he woke, the hair still stood on end all over his body from that noise.

He slumped to his knees, head resting against the mattress. "Lord, test me no more," he whispered. The dream was vivid in his mind; he could feel the staff between his fingers, he could feel the tickle of her hair against his knuckles. He clasped his hands tightly, denying their tremble, and he prayed till morning light.

Jerome was just dressing when his godson knocked at the door.

"You look ill, Stephen."

He blurted out the dream, then sat down in the nearest chair, head in his hands. "What shall I do, Father?"

Jerome touched his hair lightly. "It was only a dream, Stephen."

Stephen shook his head. "I can't face any more dreams like this." He raised his head slowly till he met Jerome's anxious gaze. "Only a dream, Father... but if *you* had such dreams, you'd understand my torment. Not another night, Father, not another night!"

The elder priest sighed. "You don't know it will come again — you've had other dreams that went away and never returned."

"It will," said Stephen, clenching his fists. "I know it will." His face was contorted with fear and

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desperation. "Help me, Father. I don't know how to help myself."

Jerome took his godson's hands in a firm grip. "This is beyond me," he said. "I'll call the bishop, we'll tell him everything. He's a man of great experience; I'm sure he'll be able to make some wise suggestion." Still holding Stephen's hands in one of his own, Jerome reached for the telephone.

Kirkwood stared at Dr. Loomis's framed diploma, but his eyes were unfocused, his inner vision elsewhere. He had visited the psychiatrist four times in as many days before reaching the conclusion of his tale. "I confessed everything to the bishop: the dreams, the way they made me feel, the girl. He... had some difficulty in understanding how they affected me. Like Father Jerome, he said they were only dreams, they were temptation to be overcome. He suggested fasting and prayer." He put a hand to his forehead, as if to soothe a pain above the brow. "He suggested I take a leave of absence from the church." His fingers curled into a fist. "I prayed and I fasted. I retired to my room and left the altar to Father Jerome. But the dreams came... the dreams... stronger than ever." He squeezed his eyes shut.

"Stronger?" inquired Loomis. "How do you mean?"

"Fuller, more elaborate, night after night. Every detail of that scene clearer and clearer, every knot on the oak tree, every curve of her body, her mouth, her breasts.... And longer — every night, a little more added at the end: first, her agonized moan, then the blood trickling down her legs." He looked up sharply, his eyes focusing on the doctor's face. "Last night... last night I touched her. I ran my hands over her breasts." He dug rigid fingers into the arms of the chair. "I don't want any more dreams. Not again, not tonight."

"You believe there's more, then?"

"I *know* there's more. The others... they lasted for weeks."

"And this one?"

"Nine days so far."

Loomis shuffled some papers, then made a slow and careful job of filing them in the bottom drawer of his desk. "You seem to have led a rather sheltered life, Father Kirkwood. Raised in a Catholic orphanage, educated in parochial schools, most of your spare time spent in church." He paused. "Doesn't it strike you that you never gave the secular world much of a chance?"

"I always knew what my goals were."

The doctor picked up a pencil, began to doodle on a memo pad. "You didn't mention any girlfriends."

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Kirkwood shrugged. "In the orphanage, I had a few friends who were girls... but, no — no girlfriends. I never wanted a girlfriend. I didn't have time for one."

"Too busy being in church?"

Kirkwood nodded.

"Now, as one professional to another, Father, wouldn't you say that you weren't exactly behaving like... the average boy?"

"I had a vocation; that isn't average."

"Ah," said Loomis, and he scribbled aimlessly for several minutes without saying anything further. Then he spoke in a more conversational tone. "Bishop Martin and I are old friends — we play golf together quite often. He's a very perceptive man." He looked up at Kirkwood, looked directly into his eyes. "Apparently we both agree that your unconscious is trying to tell you something through these dreams. I would put it a trifle more strongly than the bishop — I think your unconscious wants you to resign the priesthood."

Kirkwood sprang to his feet. "No!"

"Sit down, Father, please sit down."

But Kirkwood paced, his hands locked behind his back. "I don't believe it, no. I know where I belong; I've always known."

Loomis cocked his head to one side. "Have you, Father? After all, the life of a grocery clerk isn't the only sort available on the outside."

"The *outside?* What do you mean, the *outside?* I *am* on the outside, helping people face their troubles, helping them reach God. I'm not a monk living on some mountaintop."

Loomis leaned back in his swivel chair and rocked gently. "The religious life has its limitations, Father. The strong sexual content of these dreams indicates that your unconscious is very much aware of those limitations — and has rejected them."

The priest took a long, labored breath. "I just want to be rid of these dreams," he said, clutching the back of his own chair. "Just that."

Loomis smiled his bland professional smile. "Reconsider your life style. I think the dreams will stop bothering you if you make the right decision."

Kirkwood closed his eyes. "Thank you, Doctor," he said frigidly.

"Give it some serious thought, Father — don't discard it out of hand. Let yourself wonder, let yourself investigate. Spend some time as a normal man; go to some bar and take a look at the girls. Pick one up and go out to dinner, a movie, dancing. You might find yourself enjoying it. You're young

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enough to make a fresh choice."

"Thank you, Doctor." He slammed the office door on his way out.

Walking briskly down the street, arms pumping, breath clouding in the chill air, Kirkwood found himself unable to think properly. The psychiatrist's words rang in his ears like a death knell. He had reached the end of his road and stood helpless, unsupported by man or God, at the brink of the unknown. Only dreams... only dreams... yet he could not face another.

Tonight he would not sleep.

His steps turned eastward, and he walked along the windy lake shore, looking out upon the grey waters. Choppy waves lapped at the sand, cold and forbidding. Few people strolled near them at this time of year. Stephen found a half-buried shell, a fragile thing like a tiny ice cream cone; he dusted it off and turned it in his fingers. As a child he had walked here sometimes and picked up shell fragments and pieces of greenish glass worn smooth and round by the water. Often, he had taken them home as an offering for the collection plate. Stephen smiled fleetingly at his childhood innocence. Even then he had known his goal.

He bowed his head, and for the very first time he wondered — *Was I wrong?*

He felt guilt and contrition now for his rude behavior in the psychiatrist's office. The doctor had done his best, according to his viewpoint, and offered his learned and honest opinion. That Stephen had been under an intense strain for the past nine days was no excuse for such discourtesy.

He walked quickly to the nearest telephone, in a drug store, to call Dr. Loomis with a brief apology. But there was no answer in the office; the answering service promised to pass on the message.

After hanging up, Stephen leaned against the phone for some time. Outside the sun was setting. Streetlights blinked into feeble yellow life, while neon signs already sizzled over bars and restaurants. Someone tapped at his shoulder, wanting to use the phone, and Stephen went out on the street once again. His steps turned automatically toward the church, but he stopped short at the door and detoured to the back and his own room. He entered without seeing anyone else and sat down at his desk. He could feel muscles twitching in his arms and legs, and soon he rose to pace the floor. He passed the closet, looked in at the black suits; in the corner was another suit, an older one, light brown in color — he had not worn it in several years. He wondered if it still fit. He took it down, found a white

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shirt in the back of a drawer, dressed himself in the no-longer-familiar garments. They fit quite well — he had not gained a pound since wearing them last. The ordinary shirt collar felt odd — less enclosing but much tighter.

He went out by a rear door, and if any of the shadows that lurked in the yard were people, none of them greeted him.

Hungry, he found a small restaurant, sat at the counter and ordered a cheeseburger. He felt conspicuous, as if a sign on his back screamed *This Is A Priest.* But no one seemed to notice. The man beside him struck up a brief conversation about a newspaper headline, and Stephen replied perfunctorily until his sandwich came; then he was able to use chewing as an excuse for silence. He ate quickly, paid his check, and returned to the street.

He found himself on a block where there was a large number of bars. He had been on this very avenue before, but somehow he had never noticed all the flashing beer signs, the windows painted over black and red, the tiny remaining apertures disclosing dark interiors. He passed several before entering at a Blatz sign.

Inside, a juke box was playing lively music at one end of the room, a television set displayed a news show at the other. Connecting these two regions was the polished mahogany bar, its tender busy wiping glasses, pouring drinks, chatting with customers. Stephen stepped up to an empty spot at the long counter and ordered a beer.

"Draft?" asked the barkeep.

Stephen nodded. When the stein arrived, he downed half of it at one gulp, leaving his throat still dry and tight; then he leaned on the bar and looked around.

Once his eyes adjusted, the room did not seem too dim after all. A mirror behind the bar, partly obscured by racks of liquor bottles, reflected the soft lighting of colored bulbs. Perhaps a dozen people sat on high stools to his left and right; six or eight more occupied small tables along the opposite wall. Most of the customers were men, most dressed in suits, with their shirt collars open; some had hung their jackets over the backs of their seats. A number of women were present — several in a small group at a table in the back, one with an escort, two others apparently by themselves.

Stephen glanced at the women. One was blonde, the other dark. Both wore their hair short, bouffant, their make-up heavy around the eyes; snug dresses, sheer stockings, spike-heeled shoes. The dark one noticed his interest and smiled at him. He looked away to his drink, to the door, to the walls.

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All four walls of the bar were crowded with memorabilia — photographs, framed dollar bills, licenses, bowling and softball trophies, mounted fish and game animal heads. One particular stuffed item caught Stephen's eye, for it was most prominently displayed over the cash register — a huge elk's head, the antlers spreading out like uplifted hands... their tips almost touched the red ceiling. Squinting, he could barely read the plaque beneath it that proclaimed the year and place of its acquisition.

Below the elk, reflected in the mirror, he saw the dark-haired woman sit down beside him.

"Hi," she said, smiling. "Don't I know you from somewhere?"

His face froze in a limp grin. He couldn't remember her from church, but that didn't mean she had ever been there. "Possibly," he said. "I live in the neighborhood."

"I'm Bonnie," she told him.

"I... I'm Steve. Can I buy you a drink?"

She inclined her head, lifted her near-empty glass, and said, "Whiskey sour."

He ordered it from the bartender, and another beer.

"Do you come in here often?" she asked.

"This is the first time."

"Ah — do most of your drinking at home, hmm? Well, it's a lot cheaper that way."

He nodded.

"But lonesome."

He shrugged.

"Are you married, Steve?"

"No." He lifted his glass to clink hers. "Cheers." His eye drifted down her body, to the crossed legs and the exposed knee where the sheath skirt rode up. Her vee-neck blouse revealed a deep cleavage between plump-looking breasts, accented by a tight black cinch-belt. "You're quite attractive, you know," he told her.

She smiled. "Why, thank you, sir — I do appreciate the compliment."

He looked at her reflection in the mirror, among the bottles, and she gazed at him the same way, sipping her drink, her eyes bright over the rim of the glass, bright and bordered with deep color. Then his glance rose to the elk's head, to those majestic unseeing eyes and that magnificent crown of points, and he shivered. The woman was still beside him, speaking quietly, casually, but the sound of her voice drifted by him like smoke.

She shifted on her stool, and the motion brought her knee in contact with his thigh. Automatically, he moved away.

"It's getting kind of crowded in here, don't you think?" she said.

He tore his gaze away from the elk and looked at her once more.

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"How about going for a little walk?" she suggested. "I know someplace quieter."

His eyes focused on the wide rhinestone choker at her throat — the faceted glass sparkled with the many-colored lights of the room, obscuring the cords and veins in her neck; she held her head high to minimize creases and a slight billow under the chin. Stephen realized that she was much older than he had thought at first. He found himself comparing her carefully made-up attractions with Caroline's fresh and artless youth.

He swallowed the last of his beer. "I'm sorry, but I have to get going now. Very nice meeting you." He smiled in what he hoped was a friendly fashion and headed for the door. On his way out he cast a last look at the forlorn elk.

His steps were once more directed toward the church. A brisk wind was blowing from the east; facing into the chill, Stephen saw the full moon sailing above the horizon, just clear of the few buildings on the lake shore. Huge and ruddy, it splashed the overcast sky with light, blotting out the few stars brilliant enough to penetrate the city haze. Stephen felt that moon sear his eyeballs; he turned his face away.

Up the familiar steps he trudged, his heart as burdensome as his feet, exhaustion and depression closing over him like a wet woolen mantle. He would not sleep this night, he knew, but instead would stay in the sanctuary, close to the altar. Nor was there any need, he thought, to change into his priestly raiment — few people would enter the church before morning.

By the inner portal he halted and looked down the center aisle. In the row nearest the communion rail sat a throng of women, mostly girls in their teens and early twenties. At the soft sound of the opening door they had craned to see who entered, and then, one by one, they stood.

Feeling suddenly unsteady, Stephen clutched the archway for support and closed his eyes. Against the dark of his eyelids he saw a vision — a young woman kneeling, her black hair plaited in a long braid, her garments plain and poor and faded to dun; in her outstretched arms a newborn baby wrapped in rags, an offering, a sacrifice; accepting the gift a creature that seemed neither all man nor all beast, with the stature and posture of a human being, but the head and lower legs of a great stag — many-pronged antlers surmounted the crest of its skull. Then he saw that it was a man dressed in fur leggings and that his real face peered out from the ceremonial deer-head mask. As the gaunt

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figure enfolded the offering in his lean arms, Stephen realized that the child was himself.

Suddenly the man towered over him, like a naked colossus, bereft of all ceremonial facade, a large flint dagger held aloft by one outreaching arm. The dagger plunged in a swift, killing arc; Stephen felt a great torrent of tangy wetness engulf him... and with it, a brief explosion of pain.

Opening his eyes, he beheld the church once more... and the women waiting for him, twelve of them including their leader Caroline. Without touching the font of holy water, without making the Sign of the Cross or bending a knee, Stephen strode forward down the aisle. He felt his body change as he walked, felt the weight of branching horn grow upon his head, felt the knowledge of his own identity flood his being. He stamped his brazen hooves upon the wooden floor and leaped the closed gate of the communion rail. At last he understood the dreams and the constant knowledge that his place was at the altar.

The coven approached and bowed low before him, then began to disrobe and anoint themselves, chanting his long-forbidden name. The old horned god, liberated and now truly incarnate, spread wide his arms as he reared back his grand and massive head.

He bellowed a fierce and happy welcome to them all.

Coming next month

Two extraordinary novelets:

MANATEE GAL AIN'T YOU COMING OUT TONIGHT by **AVRAM DAVIDSON,** a one-of-a-kind fantasy about a young Canadian who comes to a Caribbean port for the adventure of sailing a boat through tropic seas and instead gets mixed up with some very strange island characters and creatures.

THE DETWEILER BOY by **TOM REAMY,** about a mysterious series of killings and a private detective named Bert Mallory who finds the horrifying link. One of the best and most gripping blends of sf and mystery fiction we've ever read — from the author of "San Diego Lightfoot Sue."

The April issue is on sale March 1. Or use the coupon on page 136.

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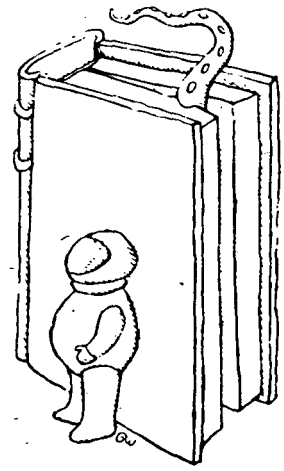
ALGIS BUDRYS

Books

The Space Beyond, John W. Campbell, Jr. Pyramid Books, $1.75

Orbit 18, edited by Damon Knight. Harper & Row, $8.95



In keeping with an old SF magazine tradition, the two-part peregrination about John W. Campbell, Jr., which was supposed to conclude in the last installment, has unexpectedly grown into a three-parter. And thereby hangs a tale:

Once upon a time in the recent past, Roger Elwood walked into a bookstore and was introduced to an old friend of John Campbell's. Halfway through lunch, it developed there were three hitherto unheard-of, unpublished, forty-year-old JWC, Jr., novellas. The guess was they had probably been intended for Hugo Gernsback and shelved when Campbell was hired by *Astounding*. Elwood dropped his fork, but not his acumen.

The novellas are *Marooned, All,* and *The Space Beyond.* They are now out, under a nice Sternback astronomical painting, as *The Space Beyond,* from Pyramid, and represent the most important SF event ever made available for $1.75. Pyramid, busy changing ownership in the midst of producing this book, has not been able to react with appropriate promotional effort, so it is also one of the quietest SF events ever made available. Never mind — go get it anyway.

The package includes an illuminating Asimov introduction, a scholarly George Zebrowski afterword, and an editing credit for

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Roger Elwood. This comprises all the information available to the casual purchaser, and you will search in vain for one word from Elwood, or in any of the Asimov or Zebrowski, to explain how this book came into being. Even the alert, helpful Pyramid editor you get after struggling through the parent company's switchboard cannot tell you much, since the book was purchased and copyedited by the previous administration, which is now mum. It simply does not seem to have occurred to anyone on that previous staff that you don't leave a baby on the doorstep without pinning a note to its blanket.

Well, one of these days I'll do an essay on how publishing companies function, and how these factors might explain — or obscure — some of the things that happen on the display rack. Meanwhile, for those of you who can't find Roger Elwood's phone number, here is what you see:

The writing is pure pre-Stuart Campbell, right down to the eccentric punctuation which slipped by Pyramid's former copyediting staff. (The famous Campbell spelling, fortunately, did not).* *Marooned* is a sort of capsulized *The Moon Is Hell,* set aboard an exploratory vessel trapped in Jupiter's atmosphere with no way to break free, the food and air running out, and the internal temperature dropping. Fortunately, there are three Campbellian heroes on board, and not only is the problem solved but their flanged-up inventions will be worth a fortune by virtue of transforming modern technology.

All is the prototype on which Heinlein wrote *Sixth Column.* And *The Space Beyond* is a superscience interstellar war opera, very reminiscent of *The Black Star Passes* and similar productions, but with peculiarities. For instance, Campbell, unlike E.E. Smith, tended to back off from depicting personal violence; he could burn a fleet anytime, but one-on-one mayhem at close range is much less often seen in his work. *The Space Beyond* is thus somewhat atypical, although still clearly pre-ASF Campbellian.

It should be understood that no one now knows exactly when these stories were written, or what the author intended for these particular drafts. Elwood went to the extent of assessing the age of the manuscript paper, and comparing the typing to known work from Campbell's typewriter of the mid-1930s. Nor is there any doubt from context that they are genuine Campbell. But there is no hard data. The work almost certainly pre-dates Campbell's first marriage, to Dona Stu-

**This note, by the way, recognizes one of the many major functions performed by Miss Catherine Tarrant of the old ASF editorial staff.*

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art. There is no reason why anyone should be able to remember anything about it, of those few who might have been there and are still with us.

The stories make pretty good reading on their own account, if you are a superscience fan and have developed the necessary selective blindness toward visibly forthright technique. And then they are very interesting as milestones along an honorable road trod by SF and by John Campbell. Finally, they tell us rather more about Campbell the editor than we knew before.

They are almost certainly not final drafts. *Marooned,* for example, contains many hasty sentences, such as one which superficially appears to read that painting a spaceship black will help it radiate heat. The opening passages are inappropriately flippant,* and the pacing of the end pretty obviously shows it's three AM; get it all down somehow and smooth it in the next run-through. Many sentences suddenly begin with "And"; the writer is checking off the remaining points he knows must be made, although he's too fatigued to even remember why he originally listed some of them in his mental notes.

I don't think Campbell thought any of these stories were ready for publication. But there's plenty of evidence he believed correctly that they were essentially good stuff.

Marooned has obvious echoes of *The Moon Is Hell,* and on slim evidence I would guess it predates that novel. It tosses off several ideas which appear full-blown as key events in the longer story. It's thinkable that their casual treatment might instead result from a feeling that they'd been fully handled once, but I have to decide that Campbell would not have written *Marooned* if he had already written *The Moon Is Hell.* He would, I think, have used some other plot in which to convey his stunningly picturesque vision of Jupiter and the central idea which yielded the image of the floating ocean.

It certainly predates "Stuart's" *Who Goes There?,* in which the pervading misty cold aboard the trapped ship recurs even more convincingly. I would guess that something about those passages fascinated Campbell's mind, so that he reached back for them several years later.

He reached into *All* with both hands. If you outline the plot developments in what I think is the most recent of these three stories, you could lay that diagram right over a diagram of *Sixth Column.* It would be interesting to learn whether Heinlein was given a copy to read, or whether Campbell conveyed all this secondary as well as primary

**And introduce a character named Robert Randall.*

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invention simply in conversation or in correspondence. The closeness of the resemblance transcends the usual effect of Campbell casually sowing ideas broadcast, which in this particular case also resulted in Fritz Leiber's less but still openly derivative *Gather, Darkness!* as well as such tertiary evolutions as Dianetics, the Modern Science of Mental Health.

All three of these stories abound in notions, thoughts, and offhand mentions which later turn up again and again in "modern science fiction," sometimes under the short-lived Stuart byline, usually under someone else's. I was hearing some of them as if newly minted across Campbell's desk or over the *osso bucco* as late as 1959. It seems clear that for all Campbell treated ideas as common property which freely generated themselves almost spontaneously in the air about us, he never forgot a one of them once it had ever seemed valid enough to put in a story. In some cases, such as that of *All,* he was gut-determined to get them published even after he was strictured from bringing them out himself. And of course he was right.

But what seems particularly clear is that Campbell had an intellectual *floreat* in the early 1930s which was even greater than anyone had hitherto known; a major portion of his public greatness in the 1940s derives from far more private visions during his apprenticeship in and immediately after his college years. What he seems to have spent most of his time perfecting in the "golden age" was the manner in which he let the world see what had been stored up over the previous decade.

What an interesting young man. Shuttling between New Jersey and Cambridge over icy surfaces in a Model A — always late for class, pressing the accelerator to the floorboards, peering through the foggy windshield at the Boston Post Road, very proud of his ability to do that and not get killed, he told me once a long time later — and thinking, thinking, thinking. I hear him chuckling and humming with satisfaction. I see him beating one mittened paw on the hickory rim of the steering wheel, sticking out his lower jaw and going "Hah! Heh heh heh! Ha!"

Damon Knight, as I once nearly said in reviewing an earlier *Orbit,* edits almost as if for F&SF. It was truer then than it is now, as we shall shortly see, but nevertheless, if you like this magazine, you ought to respond favorably to the *Orbit* series of original SF anthologies, of which the current example is #18.

Orbit is organized exactly like a magazine, except it's in hard covers — in the first edition — carries no ads, and usually lacks an up-front

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editorial. In addition to stories, it has illustrations, fillers, columns, and even a competition — in which, I was glad to see, my friend Sundown Slim Sanders, the former English teacher, rock musician and present bicycle racer and martial arts expert, has made some small mark. Of all the books there are, this is the most warmly magazine-like, and over the years has built up something of a stable. You can almost count on a Kate Wilhelm, a Lafferty, and a Gene Wolfe,* plus a selection of the most interesting established new authors around, which in this case is George R.R. Martin. Of late, you have also been able to count on some sometimes very far out experimental work, not all of it SF by the definition of being drama made more relevant by social extrapolation. In some cases, the authors are even newer, in the sense that they have no public reputation in the SF universe, so that their work stands uncolored by any significance attached to their bylines.

I think, in other words, that Knight makes many of the right moves; he conserves what is best of the established, aids the transition of apprentices into full establishment, and introduces not only new individuals but new approaches. I would, if things were different, like very much to appear in *Orbit* with my own work now and then. If I ever get back to writing short stories, I will certainly make an attempt. And yet I think *Orbit* looks a little better in its description than it does in actuality.

The present volume is worth its price for the Wilhelm, which is "Ladies and Gentlemen, This Is Your Crisis," and for Gary Cohn's insouciant "Rules of Moopsball," which is a fannish gag and a great one. George R.R. Martin's "The Meathouse Man" is nearly as good, but reveals this writer's most persistent shortcoming, which he ought to be working on. He is almost Disch-like in his persistence with a good idea, slugging it onward through scene after detailed scene, each scene good, but in the end failing to have done anything unpredictable, so that the intervening detail turns out to have existed for its own and only acceptably interesting sake. He appears to be "too wordy." He is not; he is as yet a little weak on resolving plot inventively. The reader, who has been subconsciously expecting that some of these extra words are doing extra work, in the form of planted material on which a physical or philosophical climax will be built, suddenly gets the feeling he's been accepting rubber checks.

This is not at the level of a Class A flaw in Martin; in work by a lesser

*No Wolfe this time. Tsk.

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artist, it would be camouflaged in general mediocrity. Moreover, any issue of any magazine — and some lists of award winners — will show you perfectly readable work with much greater shortcomings. But there is some expectation that a magazine which comes out only once a year will contain the very best story that author wrote that year. There are good reasons why this cannot be true except by chance, but the expectation is there. And there can be no counter-expectation that soon — next month — he'll do better.

Then there is the experimental stuff — "experimental" in that special sense of the undergraduate writing class, where unconventional technique and elliptical narrative are taken to be in the same class with musical finger exercises or the young sculptor's passing interest in arranging found objects.

Work like Craig Strete's "Who Was the First Oscar To Win a Negro?" or "The M&M, Seen as a Low-Yield Thermonuclear Device" by John Varley, is work that requires sitting and thinking about. In the case of the Strete, because there are obvious rewards to be gotten from picking at it until some of its many levels of allusion begin to interact a little; in the case of the Varley because he has taken a story which would otherwise occupy half a page — and often has — and tricked it around until it takes five minutes to realize its essential banality.

Work of this kind almost has to be supported by some straightforward stuff with a clear beginning, middle and end, for the reader who just wants to sit and enjoy, as most of us do most of the time; crossword puzzles are available elsewhere. In that middle area, *Orbit* is surprisingly... bland. Only Howard Waldrop's "Mary Margaret Road-Grader" seems spritely and fresh, and Raylyn Moore's "A Modular Story" has an idea with a little punch left in it for those of us who once roamed this primitive land armed only with a corporate American Express card. (As a matter of fact, it has the poignancy for us that the story about the blonde in the convertible once had for hitchhiking GIs. See an early issue of F&SF for that one). The rest — including two essentially identical future jazz stories by Kim Stanley Robinson, and a well-written, image-filled but logically ridiculous story in which fuel shortage produces incest — are variously thin, undeveloped, victims of nonsequitur, or overbred perennials like Kathleen M. Sidney's "The Teacher." Even the Lafferty's invention flags after the first paragraph, and we are left with a used polemic lying on the floor at our feet.

Now, why should this be?

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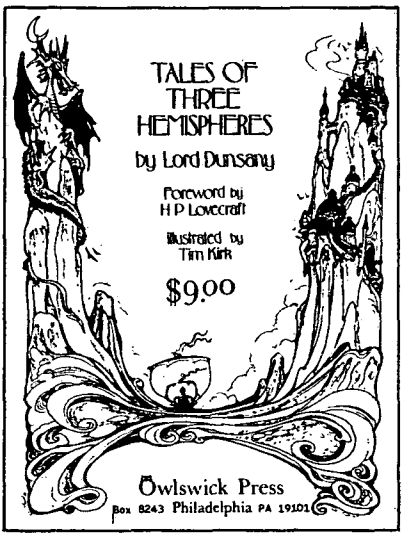
Knight is as sincere as anyone who ever took his work to heart, and he has the budget and the time to assemble an "issue" of outstanding caliber. Yet, for one thing he would never juxtapose two jazz stories, and especially not by the same as yet unpolished writer, if he were going to press every thirty days, or six or four times a year. Then, the Varley and the Wilhelm are two chapters out of the same social history, and the Moore might be another. Mix well, and let stand one decade, and we have the totally overmanaged society of Lafferty's "The Hand with One Hundred Fingers." A major chunk of the book, then, persistently delineates a gloomy view of the world; a persistent fog of depression which follows the reader from story to story, essentially unrelieved either by bursts of sunshine or by blatant volcanic eruption, and, inevitably, yielding an impression that Knight was feeling kind of low about things in general when he put this one together.

That happens. But with frequent periodical publication, it irons out over the long run. Moreover, with manuscript reading and purchasing going on continuously, any given issue can be assembled and balanced from an inventory. Campbell, for instance, could once a month turn to his right and have Miss Tarrant break out 3x5 cards



on a hundred stories cross-indexed by subject, length, and, I would guess, mood. And if it had happened that no particularly good work crossed his desk on a given week, why, he could just not buy anything that week, and hardly worry at all, unless Miss Tarrant happened to mention they were low on 3000-worders, or overbought on 18,000-word novelettes about clever Earthmen and stumblebum aliens.

A magazine editor's creativity rests in large part on a good system for managing inventory in the face of regular production schedules and equally regular incoming sales figures. And he is in daily contact

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with the entire milieu — phone calls from agents, visits from writers, skull sessions with illustrators to remind him there's more than one art, clashes with the promotion and advertising functions so that his feet stay a little closer to the hard ground of economic survival.

I would guess it would be very difficult to maintain periodical-type creativity in any editorial situation with very long periods. The tendency to begin flying up one's own navel is bad enough under the best circumstances, as Campbell latterly began to demonstrate.

Knight is also a major creative technician; a splendid analyst of story functions, a skilled handler of writers, an individual with a clear-cut personality — in short, a top-flight editor — and he puts out a good product. But not as good as it ought to be. Probably, no worse than the best possible.

And that's what worries me, when the trend is so much toward the book format in SF. Of all the influences that have molded this field over the years, evolving it from Gernsback and through Campbell among many others, the recognizable ones are dialectical or artistic. They reflect changing social definitions of "quality" and "art," and can be seen as logical intellectual developments. But here is one that is, I think, essentially mechanical, and yet as effective in its way as the 18th century change from plucked strings to struck srings in the principal solo musical instrument.

Book SF is different from magazine SF even when it doesn't need or want to be. Book SF people are different from magazine SF people even when they're the same person. If we lose one of those differences, it will no longer matter who discovers what of John Campbell or remembers how he was. There will be other losses, equally grave, many in number. But that one alone would be sad enough. Sad enough.

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Here's a story to warm the heart of any true railfan, about the GC&W Limited, which made the trip each day from Green Corners to Woodsville and back . . .

The Day The Limited Was Late

by ROBERT F. YOUNG

Steam hissing, bell clanging, the GC&W Limited, with Luke at the throttle of the 4-6-4 locomotive, pulled into the Green Corners station. As usual, she was right on time.

Ben the brakeman ran the length of the train and threw the switch that reconnected the station siding to the main line. Then he stood by the track, waiting for the Limited to move out.

Luke leaned through the cab's right-hand window and watched the passengers for Green Corners step down to the platform. Buck the fireman joined him. Fred the mailclerk opened the door of the mail car and tossed the Green Corners mail bag down to Jim the baggageman, and Jim the baggageman handed up the Woodsville mail bag to Fred. In addition to the tender, the mail car and the passenger car, the Limited consisted of a reefer, a gondola (both empty at the moment) and a caboose.

John the conductor supervised the alighting of the passengers. Beyond the station's red roof, the cubelike houses of the little town were a dazzling white against the grassy-green slope of the valley. After all the passengers for Green Corners had alighted, John helped those for Woodsville get on. Ruth the ticket agent came to the door of the station and waved to Luke and Buck, and they waved back. She gave Luke a warm smile, and Luke felt himself blushing.

"Aren't you going to report that bad stretch of roadbed we went over back at Marshy Meadows, Luke?" Buck asked.

"It wouldn't do any good," Luke said. "You know as well as I do the section gang won't budge out of their beds till they get that new work car they ordered."

Buck was a batch, same as

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Luke. So were John the conductor, Ben the brakeman and Fred the mail clerk. Like Luke and Buck, they were married to the railroad. The GC&W.

As the last of the passengers for Woodsville climbed on board, Luke pulled out his solid gold railroad watch and looked at it. Then he replaced it in his overalls pocket and turned off the bell. "Blow the whistle, Buck," he said.

Buck pulled down hard on the cord. Actually, blowing the whistle was Luke's job, but he had long ago relegated the task to Buck to justify to some extent at least the fireman's presence on a coalless coal-burner.

"All a-boooooooaaarrd!" John the conductor cried. "All a-boooooooaaarrd!"

Luke released the brakes and moved the throttle forward a notch. The Limited began creeping out of the station. Ben the brakeman (sometimes he was more appropriately referred to as Ben the switchman) waited till the caboose went by, then returned the siding switch to its former position, ran after the caboose and swung himself on board. He disappeared inside.

Luke gave her some more throttle. The engine picked up speed, the cars rattling faintly as they rolled along behind. Luke revved her up some more, listening appreciatively to the pounding of the six driving-wheels. The train went by Arrowhead Hill, and high up on the grassy-green slope he saw the little house where he lived all alone. The rest of the train-crew stayed at Mother O'Malley's Green Corners boarding house, but Luke prized his privacy. Also, he'd had his eye on Ruth the ticket agent for a long time, and having a house of his own was sort of an investment in the future.

Presently the powerful 4-6-4 locomotive began climbing the steep incline that led up to Spiny Ridge. When she reached the ridge back, Luke let her pick up speed. To his right — east, you'd call it — fuzzy fir trees stood close together, blocking the view, or rather, hiding the fact that there was none; on Buck's side of the engine, the ridge overlooked an expanse of grassy-green pastures with cows standing in them, and houses and barns showing in the background.

After John the conductor finished punching the passengers' tickets, he came forward to the engine to chat. Considering his age and considering the fact that he had to hop from car to car and climb over the back of the tender to boot, this was no mean accomplishment. But he disliked remaining with the passengers. He simply couldn't stomach them, not because he didn't hold with what he

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called their "indolence." "All they ever do," he said peevishly, standing in the cab between Luke and Buck, "is ride back and forth between Green Corners and Woodsville and between Woodsville and Green Corners. Don't they have any other way of occupying their time? Don't they ever *work*?"

"Why should we care?" Luke said sensibly. "They keep the GC&W in business, don't they?"

"Well, I don't suppose we should care, as far as that goes," John admitted. "But being in contact with them every day like I am, you can't help but notice their indolence. All they do is sit and gawp out the windows, and gasp every time they see a hill or a tree."

"What's wrong with that?" Buck asked.

"People should have more to do than gawp and gasp at trees and hills they've seen hundreds of times before. It doesn't make any sense."

"The trouble with you, John," Buck said, "you think too much. Instead of sitting up in your room every night, worrying about how old you're getting and about maybe having to retire pretty soon, you should join the rest of the boarding-house bunch in Mother O'Malley's living room and enjoy yourself. Last night we played pinochle till twelve o'clock — had a grand time."

"I don't like pinochle," John said.

Seated by the cab window, his right hand resting on the throttle, Luke found himself thinking of Ruth. Of what a nice girl she was and how strange it was she'd never married. Certainly she must have had plenty of proposals, what with that wavy brown hair of hers and those blue eyes and those willowy legs. Was it possible she was waiting for *him* to ask her? His heart pounded at the thought. Gosh! if only he dared!

By the time he came out of his reverie, John had gone back to talk with Fred the mail clerk and the Limited had left Spiny Ridge behind and was moving briskly across Buffalo Prairie. To right and left — north and south now, the track having changed direction — the terrain was grassy-green and almost perfectly flat. However, despite the place-name, there were no buffaloes to be seen — only the usual milch cows and once in a while a wild horse.

"Blow the whistle, Buck," Luke ordered. "We're approaching Hell's Bend."

Buck blew six short blasts. He enjoyed blowing the whistle.

Luke slowed the engine as they neared the Bend. He slowed her even more as they started around the curve. It was a dangerous one, because the big green hill on the left made seeing where you were going impossible. Not only that, the

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roadbed wasn't banked; and on the right, as you went around, there was a deep gulch that would spell doom to both passengers and crew were the Limited to jump the rails.

"Luke! Luke!" Buck shouted. "There's a cow on the track!"

Luke's sharp eyes had already spotted it. It was a big Holstein and it was straddling the center rail, facing the oncoming locomotive. Luke sighed. It was too late to brake, but he was able to slow the engine considerably by pulling the throttle back a couple of notches. However, the cow didn't stand a chance. The cowcatcher knocked it down and pushed it along the track, sparks flying to beat the band. Finally the cowcatcher edged it off the rails, and it came to rest on the lip of the gulch, one of its legs broken off and the other three jutting stiffly into the air.

"If we'd hit it a little harder, it'd gone into the gulch," Buck said disappointedly.

"I know," Luke said, half wishing he hadn't slowed quite so much.

After coming out of the curve, the Limited began rolling north across Dead Man's Desert. On either side of the roadbed, cacti stood. There were numerous arroyos, several empty water holes and lots of rock formations, one of which looked like the steeple of the Green Corners Methodist Church.

Up ahead lay the Evergreen Forest, which bounded Woodsville on the north, west and south. The town itself was hidden by the wispy dark-green trees.

"Blow the whistle, Buck," Luke said.

After the shriek of the whistle died away, Luke got out his gold railroad watch again. They were right on time, as usual. The citizens of Green Corners and Woodsville could set their clocks by the Limited — that's how punctual she was. As a matter of fact, they *did* set their clocks by her. They had to. In the O-gauge universe they lived in, with its variable nights and days, she was the only constant.

Soon the train entered the Evergreen Forest, and presently white, cubelike houses showed beyond the trees. Luke slowed her long enough for Ben the brakeman to jump down from the caboose and run up the roadbed and throw the siding switch, then he began bringing her into the station. Finally he turned on the bell and brought her to a smooth stop, spotting the mail car and the passenger car alongside the platform.

The Woodsville station was a dead ringer for the Green Corners station, except that it was white instead of red. The passengers for Woodsville alighted and those for

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Green Corners climbed on board. It was difficult to tell one batch from the other because their faces were little more than vague blurs. Moreover, all of them wore the same sort of apparel: the men, dark-gray suits and white sombreros; the women, gay print dresses of exactly the same cut and color; while the children, boys and girls alike, wore one-piece brown playsuits and red stocking caps.

Fred the mail clerk tossed the Woodsville mail bag down to George the Woodsville baggageman, and George handed up the Green Corners mail bag to Fred. Jane the Woodsville ticket agent came to the door of the station and waved to Luke and Buck. She was nowhere near as pretty as Ruth, in Luke's opinion, but Buck seemed to think she was the cat's meow, and it was clear from the warm look she gave the handsome young fireman that she thought he was the cat's meow too.

Luke consulted his railroad watch. It was time to move out. "Blow the whistle, Buck."

"All a-boooooaaarrd!" John the conductor cried. "All a-boooooaaarrd!"

Ben the brakeman had already run down to the other switch and "bent the rails." Now, as the "hearse" went by, he bent them back and hopped on board. Recently Luke had had to caution Ben about his carelessness. The brakeman was too confident for his own good, and one of these fine days he was going to make a misstep and wind up lying across the track, and even Ben knew what would happen then.

Gradually the Evergreen Forest thinned out, gave way to more open country. After he finished punching the tickets, John the conductor came forward again, carrying his lunch pail. Buck got his and Luke's out of the tender, and the three men had lunch together, Luke keeping one hand on the throttle and one eye on the track. John had peanut butter sandwiches and orange pop, Buck had banana cream pie and chocolate milk, and Luke had pizza pie and hot cocoa.

When they finished eating, John went back to the mail car to chat with Fred, and Buck leaned back in the fireman's seat for a brief nap. Luke wasn't sure, but it didn't seem to him that the engine was pulling the way she should. This became more apparent as the Limited began moving up the slope that led to Stony Ridge. Soon, though, they were rolling along the crest of the high hogback; and if there was any diminution of power, it was no longer noticeable.

Luke slowed her a little as they neared the trestle that spanned the Spoon Handle River. As always, he was concerned for the safety of his

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passengers. The Spoon Handle flowed into Sparkly Lake, which was visible through the cab window on Buck's side. Presently, as the Limited began moving out onto the trestle, the stream itself could be seen far below, winding its way through the gorge. To the west, the gorge narrowed rapidly, its precipitous slopes finally coming together to form a natural cul-de-sac. At the base of the juncture the water of the river could be seen emerging from a dark cave about which innumerable tales had been told, but into which no one had ever dared venture. The most popular tale, and the one that Luke subscribed to, had it that in the old days a tribe of wild Indians had lived in the cave and attacked the trains and that finally the U.S. Cavalry had come and wiped them all out.

Soon the gorge lay behind, and the Limited began roaring down the long curved embankment that led to the base of the Mountain. No one had ever thought to name the Mountain, probably because it didn't need a name. Whenever you said "Mountain," people knew immediately that you meant *the* Mountain, for the simple reason that there were no others.

It was a singularly bleak formation, and it rose abruptly out of the landscape without so much as a single hill to herald it. Oh, there were a few trees high on its slopes and a scattering of wiry bushes, but that was all. The railroad tunnel went through it exactly in the middle and was as black as midnight.

According to John the conductor, the passengers always became apprehensive when the Limited was approaching the tunnel and, once they were inside, always said the same things. Like, "Gosh, it's dark in here!" and, "Brrrr! — I'm scared, aren't you?" This kind of behavior annoyed John to no end. "You'd think," he would say, "that after all the times they've made this run they'd be able to take the tunnel in their stride, or at least think of something different to say. But no — every time it's the same old malarkey!"

Sometimes it seemed to Luke that too many things annoyed John. The old conductor seemed to forget that every time the Limited came to the tunnel *he* probably said the same thing too. Probably "We're about to enter a tunnel, ladies and gentlemen. Don't be alarmed when it starts to get dark." And he seemed to forget also that all he had to do to alleviate the passengers' apprehension was to turn on the lights.

"Blow the whistle, Buck," Luke said. "There may be a cow in the tunnel."

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Even if there was a cow in the tunnel, blowing the whistle wasn't going to make it move off the track. But what good was a whistle if you didn't use it now and then?

Buck blew a series of short blasts.

A moment later the Limited plunged into the black bowels of the Mountain.

Luke switched on the engine's powerful headlight, and the beam burned a white swath through the darkness, gleamed on the pressed sheet-metal rails. The walls of the tunnel amplified the pounding of the driving wheels, turned it into a steady roar that drowned out the rattling of the cars. The track up ahead appeared to be empty, but Luke had Buck blow the whistle again anyway. The subsequent series of shrieks almost lifted the Mountain off its foundation, and Luke knew he was in for another lecture from John. John always lectured him whenever he had Buck blow the whistle in the tunnel, saying that it was both unnecessary and downright nerve-shattering, that as conductor he couldn't condone such conduct and that he had half a notion Luke did it just to annoy him. Luke always kept a straight face and never said anything back.

At length Luke discerned daylight up ahead and turned off the headlight. But he didn't increase the engine's speed because Marshy Meadows lay just beyond the tunnel's mouth, and that was where the bad stretch of roadbed was. Instead, he pulled the throttle back a notch. Not that he needed to, for the engine was slowing of its own accord.

Even then, he didn't immediately draw a connection between the loss of power and the bad roadbed. It wasn't until the engine emerged from the tunnel and he saw the break in the track that the truth hit him. He braked her then, braked her for all she was worth. Slowly she ground to a halt, hardly more than a section of track distant from the separation.

"How come we stopped, Luke?" Buck asked.

Luke pulled out the big red GC&W RR bandanna handkerchief he carried in the back pocket of his overalls and wiped his face. Then he leaned out his side of the cab and pointed up the track. "*That's* why."

Buck leaned out his side and looked. "Holy mackerel!" he said.

After setting the brakes, Luke climbed down from the engine and began walking up the roadbed. Buck joined him. The roadbed was bounded on the south by the low-lying fields known as Marshy Meadows and on the north by a big pasture enclosed by a split-rail fence. Up ahead, the water tower

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could be seen. Beyond it, the track began the long curve that led into Green Corners valley.

For some reason the Marshy Meadows stretch of the GC&W had always been more susceptible to vibration than the rest of the Pike, and, as a result, the ballast forming its roadbed had settled to a degree where the rails actually sprang up and down whenever the Limited passed over them. Inevitably this had resulted in the pulling apart of two of the track sections. Obviously they'd nearly pulled apart the last time the Limited had gone through, and just as obviously its recent approach through the tunnel had created the minute amount of vibration necessary to finish the job.

When Luke and Buck reached the break, Luke studied it with experienced eyes. It was a bad one, all right: the pins had pulled completely free.

He knelt by the track for a closer look. "What're we going to do, Luke?" Buck asked plaintively. "We can't make the passengers walk all the way to Green Corners, and the section gang won't do a darn thing till they get their new work car. What're we going to do?"

Luke straightened. "We're going to fix it ourselves. You go back into the tunnel and get Fred and Ben and tell John everything's under control and to turn on the car lights and keep the passengers calm. I'll wait here."

Buck took off like a shot, and a moment later he disappeared into the tunnel. Luke utilized the delay to make a comprehensive survey of the situation, and by the time Buck returned with Fred and Ben, the resourceful young engineer knew just what had to be done and exactly how to do it.

Under his direction, the three men got a split-rail apiece from the nearby fence to use as levers, while he got one himself to use as a brace. "Now," he said, "I want all of you to stand facing the break, one on each side of the track and one in the middle. Whoever stands in the middle will have to straddle the center rail and keep his feet between the wooden ties, and, believe me, he'd better be careful! Okay, take your places."

The three men obeyed, Buck and Fred positioning themselves on either side of the track and Ben straddling the insulated center rail, his feet between the wooden ties.

"Now," Luke said, "I want each one of you to insert the end of your lever under the metal tie near the end of the pulled-out section, and when I give the word I want you to pry up and push forward — but not too far, or she'll pull out on the other end." Luke knelt and positioned his brace at right angles to the break. "All set? ...GO!"

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Buck, Ben and Fred pried, then pushed. Simultaneously, Luke shoved. The three pulled-out pins slipped into the tubular rails of the next section as smooth as pistons, and when the track tried to sag back down, it was thwarted by Luke's brace.

The four trainmen pulled their red GC&W RR bandanna handkerchiefs out of their overalls pockets and wiped their foreheads. "That was pretty slick, Luke," Buck said admiringly.

"It'll hold her till the gandy dancers get their new work car," Luke said, getting to his feet. "Then they can repair her permanently."

Ben yawned. "Guess I'll get back to the caboose," he said. He tossed his lever to one side and started to step off the track.

"Ben, watch out!" Luke cried.

The brakeman, careless as always, had stepped on the hot rail and now, his mind somewhere else, was about to step on the ground rail with his other foot and thence onto the side of the roadbed. At Luke's cry, he tried to freeze his foot in midair. He couldn't.

Horrified, his three companions saw him go as stiff as a board as the 16-volt current coursed through his body. Sparks shot from the top of his head, right up through his GC&W RR cap. His face turned blue, then black. Finally he toppled over backward and landed flat on his back, his shoulders wedged between the two short-circuited rails.

"Don't touch him!" Luke shouted.

Fred, who'd been about to do so, jumped back. "Poor Ben," he said. "Poor good-old Ben. Never harmed nobody in his whole life!"

"That goldarned third rail!" Buck swore. "Why does it have to be there!"

Again, Luke took command. Under his direction Buck and Fred pried poor Ben loose with their makeshift levers and pushed him off the track; then they carried his body back to the train and placed it gently in the caboose. Afterward, Fred returned to the mail car and Luke and Buck walked sadly back to the engine and climbed into the cab. Luke released the brakes and shoved the throttle forward. "Blow the whistle, Buck."

Savagely, Buck yanked down on the cord.

The Limited pulled into the Green Corners station 35 0-gauge seconds* late. The passengers for Green Corners got off, but none for Woodsville got on. Somehow, word always got around when the pike was about to be shut down.

**28 minutes (computed in ¼-inch scale, 1¼ seconds equal one minute)*

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Soon, now, darkness would fall.

Luke said good night to Buck and Fred, listened patiently while John lectured him about blowing the whistle in the tunnel, said good night to the old conductor, and stopped into the station's little lunchroom for supper. After studying the menu, he decided on apple pie a la mode and a glass of root beer. Ruth, who ran the lunchroom in her spare time and did all the cooking, served him. She smiled at him warmly and asked him how the pie was. Ruth was a swell cook: the crust was so tender it melted in your mouth. Gosh! but she'd make someone a wonderful wife! He considered popping the question to her then and there, but he didn't quite have enough nerve. Besides, a lunchroom was no place to propose to the woman you loved. So, after finishing his pie and his root beer, he said good night to her and started for home.

He didn't remember poor Ben till he was halfway up the hill. But he didn't slow his footsteps. He knew that there'd be a Ben the brakeman on the Limited tomorrow, the same as there'd been today, and that no one, including Luke himself, would think anything about it. And as for the body in the caboose, that would vanish during the night the way all such unpleasantnesses did.

The daylight went out. Luke groped the rest of the way up the hill to his little house and went inside. The light was already on. He pulled the coffee table over to his big easy chair, sat down and dealt out a hand of solitaire. If he was aware of the Brobdingnagian eye peering in at him through the little living-room window, he gave no sign. Maybe he knew that there was another Luke — a big little one who liked to spy on the little big one and who owned the GC&W and enjoyed putting cows on the track and doing sundry other things to make life interesting for the train crew. And maybe the little big Luke also knew — although this is doubtful — that reality is a multistoried structure whose perception on any given level depends as much on the camera's angle as it does on the camera.

His thoughts returned to Ruth. Gosh! what a peach of a girl she was! Someday he'd have done with just thinking about asking her to marry him and find nerve enough to come right out and ask her. But he knew he never would.

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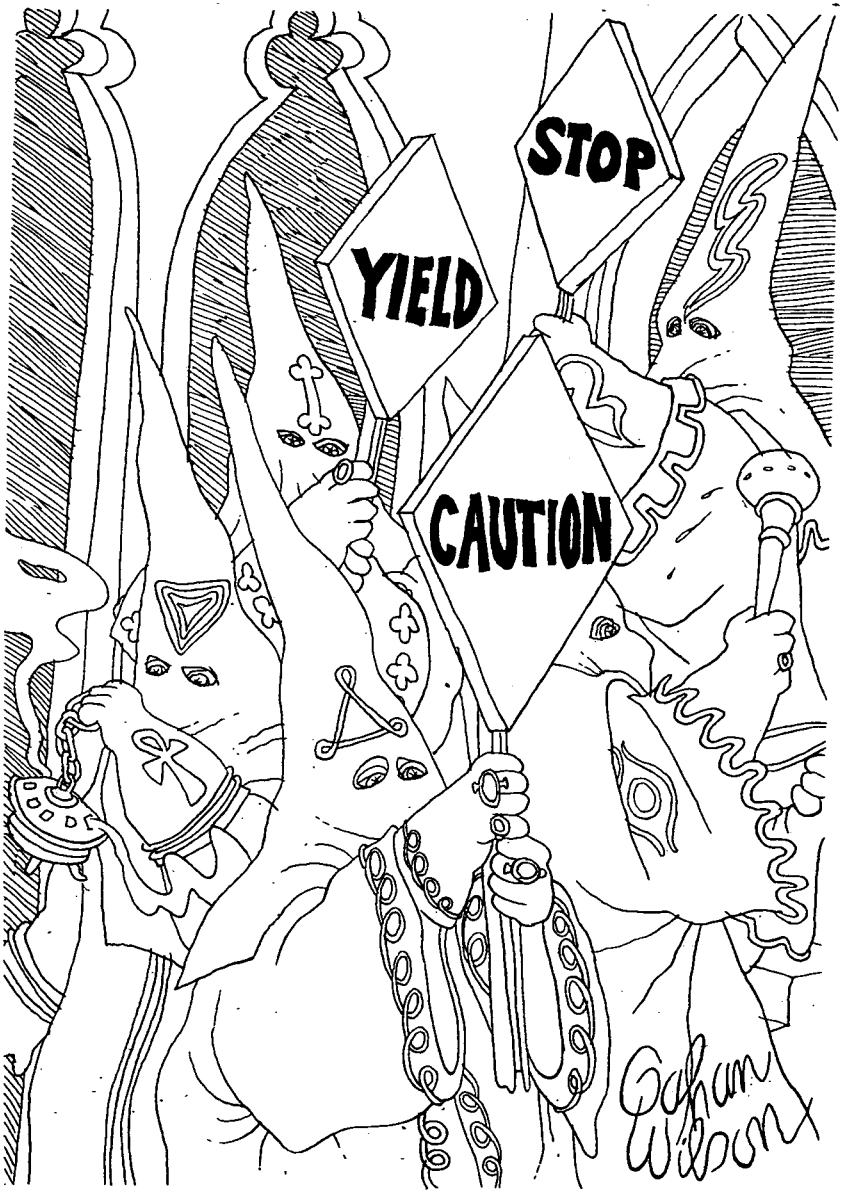

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Gerald Pearce writes: "Born in England 48 years ago and raised mostly in Iraq and Lebanon. So far as I know, I'm the only member of SFWA who speaks, reads and writes Arabic. Full-time writer for most of the last twenty years — if you count radio commercials, TV promos — for the last five years writer for the Disney Sunday evening TV show. I live in an old Spanish-style house in the Hollywood hills with my wife and son and a lot of cats." His first story for F&SF is a superior tale about one of mankind's first colonies in space, a colony that has mysteriously regressed to the stone age.

Twilight Reign

by GERALD PEARCE

We played the game compulsively, like picking at a scab.

Reed started it again even before the noise of Greiner's departing beetle fell low enough for talk. He smiled. It was my cue to say something stupid and self-defeating. Something that would push my authority to where it became tyranny — or disappeared. That was the game according to Reed's unspoken rules. The rules were his because I outranked him. If I changed them, he won. If I pulled rank, he won. I was supposed to meet him man to man, whatever that meant.

I took advantage of the rule that allowed business to come first.

"You heard the chief. Tell the diggers they're lifting out at fifteen hundred."

"Okay, Johnny." His smile deepened. I was avoiding combat. I shoved my hands into my pockets and took the path we had worn over the rim of the plateau. Now the sound of Greiner's beetle died, and from below came the urgent whisper of trees that were not quite oaks. The air was cool, heavy with moisture and a fresh green fragrance.

Below the double line of Anthro prefabs I could see the excavation in progress, men working with the skills of long training and self-discipline. They were beginning to worry me, though. The last few months before an Earthside leave was a time of deep hungers and pointless antagonisms.

Reed, I reminded myself, was a hell of a good field man, second-in-charge because of experience and ability.

We passed the radio shack and Reed accompanied me to the office.

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From the door my name jumped out in bright white letters: *John Hale Beck.* Under that the title *Coordinator.* It was part of a Morale Section conspiracy to impress me with a sense of my responsibilities. I offered name and title a curled lip, and Reed pointed downhill.

A girl who sometimes brought us pale cheese and milk from the village's outpost at High Meadow was talking to a couple of our men by the commissary. She was accompanied by a man who carried the staff of a village elder.

"She still here?"

Reed said, after judicious thought, "Apparently."

"At least with the diggers gone we'll have ten less potential rapists to worry about. See what the man wants, will you?"

"Okay."

"Maybe we ought to stop her from coming around."

"She's never alone. And it's her job."

"You think you're immune?"

He smiled thinly. "Do you?"

He didn't wait for an answer. I entered the office.

It was small and crowded. I shifted a stack of reports from the camp chair to the cluttered desk and sat down, eyeing the dispiriting accumulation heaped in front of me: stereo shots of the dig, of artifacts *in situ*, statistical breakdowns of the relics found in the various strata, soil and pollen analyses from Clellan's lab, and nothing to make sense of the human chronology.

I struggled with a sense of disorientation until Reed said from the doorway, "It's Foris," stepped aside, and the man called Foris came in.

He was stocky and long-armed, and wore a hide jacket with its front lacing undone to show the coarse blue weave of his shirt. The cloth stretched over pectorals like slabs of stone. His hair was rusty iron, his craggily handsome face the usual mask of politic reserve. He placed no weight at all on the sturdy symbolic staff he held in one hand.

As an elected village elder, Foris represented one of many Lakeside enigmas. I felt a spurt of irritation.

"Yes?"

"Your pardon. I was told I might speak with you."

"... Of course." Ambassadorial duties. *What was the formula?* Linguistics had done a good rush job, but the hypno course didn't drill you on all the diplomatic niceties. "I ... I offer hospitality." He thanked me gravely. "How may I help you?"

I thought a flicker of hesitancy crossed his face.

"Why are your men digging

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again in the old lake bed?"

"Your ancestors threw, or lost, many things in the lake."

After a moment he nodded, his eyes cool and judicial under their level brows. "Of course. We beg patience. Much of what you do is still not understood."

Which was ridiculous — unless something in their history or traditions made our story meaningless to them. If so, we were at an impasse because they had calmly informed us at the start of the investigation that they could not reveal anything about themselves, their values or beliefs until we had proved our good intentions. How we could do that without knowing what they would consider good intentions was a problem they left to us.

In my head, a pulse like a red hammer had begun to pound.

"It's quite simple," I said. "When your ancestors came here, they brought with them the tools and knowledge of the centuries of learning. These have been lost. We want to learn why, to prevent its happening again."

Something in his eyes seemed to reject the explanation. But only for a second. Then he smiled — suddenly, warmly.

"You are patient. We have so much to learn."

"Relearn."

I smiled back, accompanied him to the door. Reed had been leaning against the frame, his face locked into angled planes of silent privacy. He moved, and the Elder and I went outside. Perhaps here, I thought, was our first glimmer of a personal relationship ....

We let a little time pass looking down at the dig. Beyond it the old lake bed stretched to wooded hillocks that merged with soaring mountains. Consciously enjoying the sun's warmth, the surflike rustle of the leaves and the almost languorous rich air, I began to feel human for the first time in weeks.

"It might have been easier," Foris rumbled suddenly, "if you had come at a different season."

He turned to speak a brief formal farewell, which I had to respond to, and started down the footpath.

My well-being disappeared. That one cryptic remark had made his friendliness seem two-faced and sinister. I turned back to the office.

Reed smiled without humor, his teeth as tight and even as the tiles in a cautious mosaic.

"In the spring," he said, "a young man's fancy."

"So?"

"It's spring. Look down there."

I looked. The elder had not reached the dig. The girl stood on the fringe of operations, looking on.

Reed said, "Is ancient history

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all she's got on her mind?"

"I don't know what any of them have on their minds."

I elbowed past him into the office, snapped on the coffee pot. Reed came in, went to the window, stared down the hill.

He said, as though against his will, "I'm getting ... hints."

I dropped into the camp chair. "Okay. Give."

"What was Foris really after? Is he scared of what we'll turn up in the lake bed?"

"Maybe."

"It's spring. A lot of ceremonial activity should be going on, or being readied for. Initiations, fertility rites, name it. There's none — or so we're told. Maybe our being here is just a big embarrassment, maybe vernal rites head the list of lakeside secrets."

"Maybe. Now those hints."

"... Let me work on them a bit longer."

"If the conclusions scare you, give me your facts and I'll draw them myself."

For a moment he looked dangerous but refused to be needled. He rummaged for a cigarette. "What facts? All we've learned about these people is that they're *polite.*"

His mouth twisted the word into an obscenity. He puffed the cigarette alight, impatiently blew smoke at the ceiling.

The disconcerting truth was that even the statistical technique of culture analysis and trait prediction didn't work when applied to Lakeside. It had led us to expect a primitive authoritarianism. We found a democracy. We expected art. There wasn't any. And spring was not being celebrated...

"What do they *do*?" Reed said, almost to himself. "Just live in that damned cramped stockade village ..."

He took a drag at the cigarette, looked at it distastefully. Then he cleared his throat and walked to the door and spat and threw the cigarette away. Noises came from the coffeepot. I got up and turned it off and looked out the window.

The girl from the village, her skirts lifted a few inches above her ankles, was angling easily up the slope that rose in a sweeping curve to our left, toward High Meadow. The elder must have taken the lower path toward the village itself. Most of the men at the dig watched the girl, who walked with an easy swinging stride, tireless and graceful.

"You know what?" Reed said at last. "If Greiner had pulled me out with the diggers, I'd've thanked him" Then abruptly, "I've still got to tell the diggers they're leaving. Then I'll be in the commissary."

I munched synthetics from a box of Speed Rations I found in a

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drawer and drank warmed-over coffee as bitter as failure.

I tried to forget Reed. I still hadn't accepted the fact that in a protracted investigation a coordinator, whatever that was, spent more time in physical management and personnel relations than in actual field work. Still, he was supposed to maintain the record set in less crippling circumstances. It was a system that created public relations gluttons like Greiner, who had once been great, who was now an organization cog, well-oiled, a self-parody. It was typical of this Greiner that he had stopped off on his way to Camp Four instead of ordering the diggers out by radio. It gave his authority that personal touch.

It was just after midday when I drained the coffeepot and went down the hill. The Grade-3 boys who had been cooped up indoors preparing artifact stat charts had come down for sunshine and company, and Hill, the muscular friendly new kid from Communications had left the radio shack and lay propped against a low rock outcrop.

"Hear we're leaving," one of the diggers said.

"You're going to Camp Four, Loman's site. Greiner thinks it's the original landing place."

Andersen, the artifact specialist, stood up and dusted off the seat of his pants. His long face was dark and strained. "What've they found?"

"Apparently part of the ship."

The digger who had spoken first grinned wolfishly. "They got a cathouse there?"

"The site's uninhabited."

The gripes didn't quite manage to be humorous.

"Too bad for you guys," Hill said. "We got something good going here. How about that little girl, Andy? You think she goes for me?"

"Sex with the locals is contra policy," Andersen snapped.

Hill grinned, "Go to hell," but the tone of ritual banter had disappeared. The air crackled with abrupt antagonism.

"Forget it," I said. Andersen laughed, half embarrassed, half angry. Hill looked aggrieved but subsided. There were never enough women on the starships, and for this job only a few had been landed, all at Base Camp, which magnified the problem of avoiding incidents with the Lakeside women without knowing what might provoke one.

I climbed onto Hill's outcrop.

Since men had come here, the land had tilted. The lake had moved, the village following it. Between the oldest remains to the west and the present village by the lake curved a crescent-shaped series of mounds that enclosed

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within its arms one spur of the massif topped by High Meadow. There was much to be done...

Okay, Beck, I thought, you with your level-headed scientific objectivity, you haven't even seen Loman's dig at Camp Four, so what do you know about it? Still...

Two thousand years ago, centuries before the star drive, one of the first lumbering arks had blundered here and been forgotten. To judge from Loman's preliminary reports, a viable colony had been set up. But then what? At best, colonizer techniques stretch only so far, with sweat and muscle soon replacing the automated labor savers; but here the colonists, thinly scattered over half a continent, had regressed to the stone age. Lakeside's few thousands made up the largest settlement; they lived in complete isolation from others of their kind, and a sense of oppression hung over the stockaded village as acrid as smoke.

The new trench began three meters beyond the edge of the lake bed.

"Anything in there?"

Andersen shrugged. "Usual ramdom collection of iron junk and potsherds and neolithic flints. That's shoreward. Further out we cut into a peat bed. Firmer than terrestrial peat, but the acid concentration's similar. The tough alloys would survive it, but we haven't tested its effect on iron and steel."

"Any dates?"

"I'd estimate this section was deserted by eight hundred years ago."

"Five hundred to a thousand," a more conservative voice grunted.

I caught Andy's flicker of irritation. He scratched aimlessly at the side of his neck.

"The exploratories," he said after a moment, indicating the older, westward section of the dig, "showed the remains of a normal colony. The present village is neolithic. There" — he jabbed a finger at the main excavation — "is the halfway house where metal started going out of style. Make sense of that."

"Were the early remains really normal?"

"Make Greiner give us the diggers back, and we'll find out."

I wandered down to the dry lake bed, went down the ladder into the trench.

This was where I belonged. Greiner, too, in his good years. But Greiner had struck a chord in the public imagination, and that was the end of him. Anthro was always a choice target for pressure groups and idiots — for xenophobes who thought we were subversive, for self-styled libertarians who thought we clipped the rights of other races,

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for legislators who thought we cost too much — and Greiner became Anthro's secret weapon. Now, the hero twenty years later, jowly and slack, he was the victim of his own public relations handouts, defeated by the pressure of providing good copy, an honorable casualty in a dishonorable war.

It was cool here. Most of the wall that marked the outer limits of our penetration into the old lake bed consisted of compressed layers of centuries-old vegetable matter, fragments of its surface crumbling as I scraped a hand across it, exposing a darker region where the moisture had not begun to evaporate.

My wandering attention stopped wandering.

"Andy!"

His brooding face peered down at me.

"Who was working here?"

"Hikmet. Why?"

"He must've missed this by a couple of millimeters. There are soil deposits over the peat, and the lower strata are scrambled. Someone dug a hole. Let's look."

He handed me a trowel and dropped into the trench.

Thirty seconds later he stopped complaining that we weren't following procedure and began tunneling around something with his bare fingers.

Small, stained brown, beautifully preserved — a human hand.

Markle's buggy whined up the hill, carrying the peat block with the body toward Clellan's lab.

Hikmet put his shirt back on, took a gulp of water from a canteen. "We got your body out, but God knows what we wrecked doing it. What's the rush, Johnny?"

"You guys are supposed to lift out in ninety minutes. Will you be ready?"

"Sure we will."

"Hikmet's right." Andersen, his dark face haunted, was kneeling by the carelessly dumped filling from the grave. Now he got up with slow angularity, cleaned his hands absently on his pants legs. "You handled this like an amateur. What are you trying to prove?"

"Let's find out," I said.

Leaving Hikmet to dismantle the power rig he had set up over the grave to raise the peat block to the surface, Andy and Reed accompanied me to the lab. We found Clellan, red hair slanting over his forehead, working under the glare of the broad surgical lamp while Sanders, the unit photographer, made a running record with his stereocamera. Clellan threw us an obscene grin.

"Beats doing pollen analyses ...!"

A dehydrated body in a desert

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cave is a specimen. You relate to it abstractly. One preserved for centuries by the tannic and humic acid-laden moisture of a peat bog might almost, except for the brown staining, have died yesterday. This one was a naked human female of about eighteen who had been dropped face-up into a grave so cramped that the knees were tucked up in a travesty of the fetal position, the right arm bent under the body so that the hand extended beyond the left side. This was the hand Andy had discovered. The body's twisting had turned the face to the the right, hiding it against the matrix until Clellan's cautious fingers exposed it.

She hadn't been pretty, and there was a look of horror and pain that evoked the sound of long-dead screams, but the twisted mouth retained a hint of lively sensuality.

Reed chewed reflectively at his lower lip. Andersen stared in half-sick fascination. Sanders aimed his camera.

Clellan asked, "How old's the grave?"

"I'd figured four, maybe five hundred years." Andersen shook his head. "Doesn't seem possible."

Cleansing the exposed surfaces, Clellan revealed a dozen or more ragged puncture wounds scattered in a random-seeming pattern over the arms and neck and trunk. He grunted suddenly, began probing the matrix where the right arm bent under the body. A nearly cylindrical object about 2 cm. in diameter became visible. He gripped it with a pair of forceps, probed its length.

"...Entered between third and fourth ribs. Ribs broken by subsequent leverage, perhaps when they dropped her into the grave."

He brought the cylindrical thing into the open and raised it under the light. It was about 25 cm. long and tapered to a point. The wider end showed a slanting break revealing clearly defined wood fibers.

"Murder weapon, maybe."

"Get a chart of those punctures." Strain-lines had cut deeper into Andy's face. "Size, location, angle of entry, distance apart."

"Routine." Clellan grimaced. "Why? You know what killed her?"

Reed smiled with his mouth. "She was assaulted by a werewolf."

"She was pitchforked." Andy pointed to the wooden thing in Clellan's forceps. "That's a broken tine. They developed two-tined wooden pitchforks right after their metal usage died, and still use almost the same model."

Clellan grunted. "I can jump to conclusions too: she wasn't dead when they buried her. Any bets?"

I started to say the game was rigged, but a shout from outside interrupted.

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"...Hey! Hey, you can't go in there!"

Over sudden confused yelling I heard light running footsteps and the rustle of clothing and something hit the door. It burst open. Hill, the radio man, struggled to hold the girl from the village by one wrist. She got one look through the door and began screaming, kicked blindly and slashed at Hill's eyes with her fingernails.

He let go, and she threw herself still screaming across the room and stopped only when the table under the surgical light cut across her waist.

Her voice disappeared in an agonized gasp. Hill lurched into the room.

"She just came running," he began in a strangled voice, and I came out of a moment's slack-jawed disorganization to clamp a hand across his mouth and kick the door shut in a few startled faces.

For the girl, though, we didn't exist. She stared down at the hunched body and breathed in racking gasps as though she had run all the way from High Meadow without stopping. Clellan had reached a bony hand protectively across the specimen, and that was how we stood, unmoving. Then, in a voice as soft as the rustle of cobwebs, she started to repeat the words she had been screaming.

"...What have they done? What have they done to her?"

I said — softly — "We found her."

Slowly her face came around. The plain linen cap that always covered her hair had slipped back.

"Did you come from High Meadow?"

Just perceptibly — a nod.

"Why?"

"... I ... had to. I ... *knew* ..." Between one word and the next her voice had climbed back to a scream. She pummeled my chest with small hard fists. *"What have you done to her? What have you done to her?"*

I caught one wrist, slapped her face hard. She gasped. Her eyes went vacant and she started to go limp, then with a twisting wrench went for my eyes the way she had for Hill's. I heard the scrape of fingernails, and Clellan's voice.

"Hold her."

I held one arm. Reed grabbed the other. She kicked. Hill locked powerful arms around her knees and lifted her off the floor. Clellan moved in with an emergency hypodermic with a 3 cm. needle designed to pierce anything short of a hard vacuum pressure suit. He stabbed her neatly through the sleeve of the arm I held. Her head jerked around. She saw the needle as Clellan stepped back and her body stiffened.

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"Okay," Clellan said. "Put her down."

Cautiously, Hill set her feet back on the floor. Her eyes never left the hypo. Clellan, watching her, held it poised. It was a disposable one-shot, useless now, but she couldn't know that. The needle glinted brightly.

She released a slow breath, her tension breaking. Only her eyes moved to watch Clellan drop the hypo into a disposal chute. He gave her a smile. It was meant to be kindly, but he still looked like a pale-skinned satyr with lank red hair and dishonest, intelligent eyes. Searching for the words, he began to explain what he had done.

He might as well have spoken to a stone. He opened the door to the infirmary. "Bring her in, will you?"

Inside were three neatly made cots, to the right the door to the dispensary. Clellan shaded the windows and steered her to the nearest cot. She sat down obediently, raised her moccasined feet.

Her eyes rolled as her head touched the pillow. Then she was asleep. Clellan settled her, tugged off her cap, stood back.

Her hair spilled across the pillow. Hill had crowded in with Sanders and Andy and now stared open-mouthed. She sighed once, deeply, looking young and defenseless with her lips slightly parted and her expression shading into inexplicable contentment.

Clellan said, "What d'you think?"

I shrugged. "Maybe you just committed symbolic rape."

He snorted. Hill began cursing softly, monotonously.

"Do we have to put up with this horny adolescent?" Andersen demanded.

"Shut your face," Hill said instantly.

"All right, outside," Clellan snapped. "That goes for everyone."

The still-gawking Hill bounced himself off the doorframe on his way back into the lab behind Andy and Sanders. At the door Reed paused, smiled thinly.

"What's the matter, Johnny? You look as though you never saw her before."

In a way, I hadn't. I said so. He chuckled.

"I forgot. You've got to show us all a good example." I followed him into the lab, closing the door. He gestured at the body and turned the light off above it. "Nice change, being plagued by nymphos."

"You're a necrophiliac."

"Sure — chief," he said with derisive inflection, and the only way to aviod a head-on collision was to issue a few orders. I sent Andy down the hill to make himself useful; Sanders left for the photo lab; and Hill, reluctantly, returned

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to the radio shack. Clellan emerged from the infirmary before Reed and I could come to blows.

"She's reacting normally." He bummed a cigarette off me. "I'll give her a thorough check when she's well under. If I violate any taboos, I'd rather she didn't know about it."

"Be one way to learn what Lakeside considers taboo."

He grinned. Exhaling twin plumes of smoke from his nostrils, he looked like a dragon in an ancient illustration. "Not much more radical than giving that shot.— Which seemed like a good idea at the time, someone might've got hurt. Though I'll admit the idea of finally getting a good medical look at one of these people came as a quick afterthought. What d'you suppose upset her? Initially, I mean." He pointed to the table. "Before that."

"Ask Reed. He's picked up some hints the rest of us have missed but won't share them."

Clellan smiled wickedly. "Bashful?"

Reed parked himself on a stool, stared thoughtfully at the body.

"'I had to. I knew.' Unquote. Is she telepathic?"

Clellan stared. Reed shrugged. "Why not? The race has a latent telepathic faculty. It's faint, but it's been measured."

"More likely a hysteric," Clellan said dryly. "A neurotic inclination, a coincidence entailing emotional shock."

"What d'you think, chief?"

"Don't call me chief." He grinned. I ignored him. "See what she can tell us when she wakes up. Meantime I'll tell the village. How long's she going to sleep?"

"Oh, hell, the diplomatic angle." Clellan sighed disgustedly. "The typical reaction drifts into normal sleep in one to two hours. Get me all the time you can, will you?"

I said okay, and the intercom buzzed.

It was Hill, with a radio call for me. I told him to patch it into the lab line, and a moment later the faint swish of the carrier wave came through the speaker.

"Beck here."

"I've got news for you, boy." Greiner's voice, with a big smile in it. "I'm at Camp Four, Loman's site. We've found the ship all right, positively identified. And one of the boys turned up a cache of written records. What d'you think of that?"

I glanced at Reed. He looked amused.

"Pretty good," I said into the intercom. "All I've got is a girl with hysterics and another who was killed with a pitchfork."

"A *what?* — My God, we're not involved, are we?"

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"No, it happened before we got here."

Five hundred kilometers away Greiner sighed gustily, the man of patience beset by fools but struggling to maintain calm. "All right, Beck, let me in on the gag sometime. Meanwhile there's been a change of plan. I've delayed your transportation three hours to give you time to reorganize. I need your whole crew."

Clellan looked unbelieving.

I said intelligently, "The whole crew?"

"With portable equipment. They'll fly in tonight so we can start a full-scale investigation at sunrise. This is the break we've been waiting for."

I pulled a cigarette from my shirt pocket. He went on quickly. "If you're convinced there's anything to gain, you can stay where you are, keep a few men. Okay?"

The red hammer pulse had begun pounding in my head again.

I said slowly, "For God's sake, chief. This site is central geographically. It's the largest inhabited settlement and the longest in unbroken use. There are outlying remains we've hardly glanced at. From —"

He tried to interrupt. I plowed ahead. "From its size, location, and comparative cultural level, this was a likely population and cultural center. Eight or nine centuries ago it went into a sharp decline. All this makes it worth investigating further. And present anomalies are worth investigating in their own right."

"If they're not related to the basic question ..."

"Who says they're not? What's Anthro for — solving three-dimensional chess problems? Chief, I'm trying to do my job. If you don't like it, go fill out a form. Meantime remember I'm not an apprentice digger just out of college."

"Beck, be reasonable. And *listen*." His voice rang with the timbre of authority. A pause. Another sigh. Then, more in sorrow than anger, "Beck, if you *knew* your Lakeside colony had mothered the other degenerate settlements, it would be different. But you don't. The logical policy is to start at the beginning, now we know where it is, and track down the whole history chronologically. I'm assigning the men accordingly, and that's final. Meantime, if you want to stay, the offer still goes."

"... I'll stay."

"All right, let me see ..." I heard rustling papers. "We have all the supervisory personnel ... need lower echelon men. And Clellan, we'll need Clellan. You keep Reed and Andersen, one other man, take your pick." I was about to say

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Hikmet, but he was a jump ahead of me. "Hill. The new boy from Communications. He's a pretty good multipurpose technician. That makes four of you. That enough?"

"No."

"It's all I can spare. Take it or leave it."

I said I'd take it. He told me transportation would arrive at 1800 and signed off. Reed left to relay the new orders, and Clellan got a bottle of antiseptic and dabbed some on the scratches the girl's fingernails had left under my eye.

"You know it could be simple, Johnny: expansion outstripping the rate of instruction. It always happens a little, but they let it multiply and get out of control."

"Then where's the expanded population?"

"Gone to hell in a hearse."

It was as good a guess as any.

A few minutes later I found Reed in the commissary giving the food techs the new orders. Drawing a cup of coffee, I took it to a deserted table and sat down and put my feet up on the opposite bench. Reed came over and parked himself, his look speculative.

"You can leave too, if you want to," I said.

"Want me out?"

"You're brittle. Maybe you need a rest."

"Physician, heal thyself."

"I'll quit before I hit my limit. Will you?"

He said softly, "You could order me out."

Sure. And have him know I had pulled rank, lost the round, lost the stupid adolescent game. I also needed him here. "You said you wanted out."

"Changed my mind."

"Nymphos all over the place?"

He smiled flatly. "What about that girl, Johnny?"

"I'll get Foris. It might prove we're honorable men. If that's what we want to prove."

"It's a good guess — statistically," he said. "I'll go make myself useful."

He left. I drank my coffee.

... Start at the beginning, Greiner had said.

But where was the beginning? The Camp Four settlement? — Or the original colonists who had first lived there? What irritations, what ambitions, had driven them across the stars? None, of course, except at a remove of generations; their emigration was centuries pre-star drive. All right, how many generations? What long, slow plans had they formulated? And what would happen to them, these plans, these people, on an ideal virgin world?

I felt the irresistible appeal of a chance for a new beginning. Then I remembered the soft stained naked

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body, and the silent scream echoed through time and through my skull.

I drained my cup, went back outside. There was nothing useful to do except help load and unload the buggy that was transferring stuff to the makeshift landing stage at the base of the hill. The job was done by 1430. Sweating, I called Clellan from the stripped-down dormitory. He said the girl was starting to come around.

"No side effects?"

"None. What's more important, I ran a full anthropometric check. Whatever happened to these people didn't cause or come from any physical adaptation. Her EEG shows no deviation from the norm either. The only thing out of the ordinary is the pattern of scar tissue across her back. This is one child no one spoiled by sparing the whip. Ask her about it."

"Can't, Clellan. I've got to get over to the village before someone starts raising hell." I told him to learn what he could from her and switched off. I found Reed, told him where I was going, then remembered something.

"What's her name, Reed?"

"You really don't know?"

"I don't."

"Danela."

I commandeered the buggy and drove it off the hillside.

The crag-faced, ox-shouldered constable standing guard outside the council house in the central square assured me that the council session could not be disturbed. He smiled politely. He had a mouth like a trap and eyes like chips of flint and gave the impression that he didn't approve of me. By Lakeside standards, that had to be equivalent to physical assault in any other human society. When I tried to insist, he stopped smiling. Reluctantly I started giving him a full explanation and hit the catalytic noun in the first sentence.

He disappeared though a low doorway, leaving the council house guarded by the shadow of the pillory which late afternoon sunlight threw to within a hand's-breadth of the door. That should have been all the guarding it needed. An ugly discoloration was visible on the pillory in the warm slanting light; so ridicule was not the only punishment meted out on it. The Lakesiders in and around the trading stalls surrounding the square itself went quietly about their business. When one caught my eye, I received a nod and an irreproachable greeting. So I couldn't say they ignored me. At least no more than they ignored each other.

I waited three minutes, time to become oppressed by the smell of decaying refuse, the monotonous blankness of the long squat

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slit-windowed buildings, the yard-wide alley between them ...

Then the constable came out again, with Foris and six other elders, and we went through a pavane of elaborate courtesies and explanations ending with the agreement that Foris should accompany me back to camp. He climbed into the buggy, his face as impassive as a god's.

The sun was going down fast. I eased the buggy past the pillory, along the cart wheel-rutted street and through the stockade gate. My head churned with questions, but I only raised them, obliquely, after reaching the dig and driving up the hill and parking by the commissary.

"Your constable," I said, "refused to call you until I mentioned the girl's name."

"Normally the council session may not be disturbed." He caught my questioning look. "But she has been causing us ... anxiety."

"To her family? Or the whole village?"

"Anxiety," he said, as though thinking I had misunderstood him. He thought nothing of the sort. It was a hint that he would rather not continue the discussion. Only extreme politeness kept him from complaining about my impoliteness in pressing matters.

"On account of us?"

"No."

We got out of the buggy and he followed me to the lab. Prudently I knocked on the door. Clellan opened it, invited us in. I asked if Foris could see the body. He nodded, unbolted the Kohlman unit. The drawer slid out, slow and heavy on its rollers.

The elder's face remained a mask.

"This is what disturbed the girl Danela?"

"Partly. Something had disturbed her earlier."

"What will happen to the body?"

"An artificial substance will be substituted for the natural liquids that preserved it from the time of its burial. This will prevent deterioration while we make a complete study."

He fleetingly revealed incredulity, masked it, asked to see the girl. Clellan rolled the drawer back, bolted it, snapped on a switch. The red light blinked on. A hum began. Behind the metal, delicate needles began their work. Then he crossed to the infirmary door and opened it and guided Foris inside. I watched from the door.

She sat on the bed, her dark hair free around her shoulders. A tray of food occupied the bedside stand. She was lifting a bite to her mouth when she saw Foris and dropped it as though burned, snatched up her cap and covered her hair with agitated fingers.

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The elder neither moved nor spoke. When she had the bands tied under her chin, she sat rigid, hands clasped in her lap.

I would have given a month's pay to have watched the elder's face, but his back was to me.

He said, "It is time to go. The sleeping has been explained."

"Will I be whipped?"

"I do not decide who will be whipped."

She stood up quickly, hands still clasped, approaching the door. The elder followed. I stood aside. As she came though the door, she looked up at me. It only lasted a second — long eyes warm with complicity, a sudden secret smile — then it was gone, and the elder and Clellan had followed her out into the lab.

I felt shaken and adolescent. On Earth when you get a look like that you know what to do about it. But here ...?

"Got a moment, Johnny?"

I made apologies to the villagers, and Clellan took me aside.

"Remember the clenched left hand?" He dipped into a cabinet drawer. "This was in it. A duralloy rivet. Mean anything?"

"No."

"That girl was three months pregnant."

I stared. "Danela?"

"No, the other one."

"Any ideas?"

"Only the ones Danela's been giving me since she woke up. Which means no scientific ones. Allowing that itchy little thing within reach of mortal male like me again would be lousy coordinating, Mr. Coordinator. And how's your endocrine balance?"

"I think I just got invited to bed."

"Good. I thought I'd just been in space too long."

"She give you any answers?"

"Sorry, only small talk — what happened, why did she sleep, that kind of thing. Maybe you got back too soon, Johnny. I think she wanted to tell me something but hadn't quite got up the nerve ... I get the feeling that events of enormous complexity are taking place behind those big dark eyes of hers ..."

"I've got to take her home."

"I imagine we'll be gone before you get back. Good luck."

I thanked him and took the villagers outside to the buggy, the elder rocklike and patient, the girl withdrawn and pale and prim. We found Reed waiting in the fading light.

"Learn anything, chief?"

"No."

"And you're letting her get away? You're out of your skull."

"Shut up, Reed." I gave him a friendly grin for the villagers'

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benefit, got Foris and Danela installed in the buggy. "Okay. Those hints."

His eyes measured me. If he was scoring himself a point because I'd given him a direct order, he didn't show it. He said, "Without the facts to back it up it's only a hunch..."

"It's a professional hunch. You're paid for them. Now share it or lift out with the others and face a charge of insubordination, your choice."

I said it almost without thinking. It was a hunch of my own that Reed would accept expulsion as proof of my desperate authoritarianism but could never, because of some quirk of integrity, be able to overlook the fact that in this case his own choice would be a factor in his leaving. Therefore, it would not be a clear-cut victory. Therefore, he would have to stay. Therefore, he would have to talk.

It was right enough to work.

He eyed me for a long moment, his angular face without expression. Then, in a brittle, too-controlled voice, he said, "These people live in a stockaded village. They enforce an early curfew. Therefore they're afraid of something. But we can't find a single natural enemy, and they leave their flocks unguarded at High Meadow from sunset to sunrise. So the enemy isn't natural and has to be supernatural."

He waited with the studied immobility of the very vulnerable. I stared at him emptily, analyzing what he had said as a clownish play on the words natural and supernatural, and for some reason not laughing.

"What does it mean?"

"Until this afternoon it was just a sequence of words that kept going through my head ... a feeling. But now? There's something peculiarly *special* about that body you dug up. Look for evidence of witchcraft.

"Okay."

He gnawed his lip. I filled my lungs with cool evening air and let it out with a rush.

He said abruptly, "Any orders?"

"Yes. The old Lakeside had a metal supply. Tomorrow we start looking for it. Think of a likely place."

"Try the basin in G-14." That was a reference to the gridded aerial stereomap that hung on my office wall. "It won't be easy to get to, but ..."

"We'll start first thing."

"Okay," he said, relaxing. I looked at him sharply. His old expression had returned, and — unless I imagined it — he almost added the derisive word "chief" but thought better of it.

I boarded the buggy.

Twilight did nothing to soften

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the village's angular unpleasantness.

The central square was empty. Except for the smoke from cooking fires that trailed from the roofs, this might have been a place my crew had just dug out of the detritus of time.

A small knot of people appeared from an alleyway. I parked close by.

The welcoming committee consisted of three elders, the constable, and a thin bearded man who turned out to be Danela's father. He offered punctilious thanks, but his eyes were vague, his thoughts elsewhere. That was probably a breach of politeness. I liked him for it. It suggested he might have feelings involved, though he did not look at Danela. Nor did she at me. Her father and an elder led her away, one on either side, neither touching her. The others dispersed, leaving me with Foris. We hadn't exchanged fifty words. The scene had evoked feelings of unfinished business, of secrecy, exclusion ...

I hinted. The elder offered hospitality. I accepted, and in the cramped main room of his house met his wife and two adolescent children who all politely wished me a pleasant evening and disappeared through a hide-flapped opening at the far end of the room.

I had never felt less welcome anywhere.

We sat by the open-hearth fire that burned quietly under a clay pot and sent pale smoke to the ceiling where some escaped through a vent, but not much. There was a scattering of hides, straw-packed cushions, underfoot a split-reed mat. Through the smoke, the fire and two tallow lamps showed the window coverings laced tight. The shadows might have hidden anything.

And so we talked, of crops and cattle, of democracy and the election of elders, of rain and the lake, the recollection of a drought and long rain-drenched winters, of bone-breaking toil from dawn to sunset. They wouldn't let us make it easier for them. When I asked bluntly about Danela and the anxiety she had caused, he answered in terms too delicately general to be useful.

"What about that body we found, elder?"

Strange, he admitted. No, it meant nothing to him. But hadn't he been concerned about our digging into the old lake bed? Only interested, he said; we hadn't dug that far out before.

"What of your religion, elder?"

"We have none."

I said, "You have the word."

"The word, yes — the idea. As we have always had the word iron, but until your coming no clear knowledge of its meaning."

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"Is it permitted your people to have a religion if they choose?"

"They do not choose. We are one. In unity lies peace."

... Peace, of course. And the shadow cast over it was a stake with a heap of fagots, the shadow of Lubjanka, of Pentagon IV, all the symbols proclaiming man's will to servitude. What might they consider a threat to unity? What catalogue of crimes brought men to the pillory? Murder? Rape? There was no word for rape. Theft, then? Religion? Witchcraft? I sought a word for magic. There wasn't one. Was it my fault? Or Linguistics'?

I asked him. He said murder — though the oldest villager could not remember one — theft, curfew violations, disrespect for authority, personal improprieties. I wondered what they were. He wouldn't say.

"Do you punish all crimes at the pillory?"

"Yes."

"Do you ever put men to death?"

"Yes."

"And the means?"

"The pillory."

The sudden strident wailing was the curfew horn. I stood up. So did he, opening the door and calling to his wife to bar it after us.

The air was cool. Torches in clay brackets burned at every third or fourth doorway. Stars stretched limitlessly overhead.

We approached the buggy as three men stepped from an alley. One carried a flaming torch that lit their faces: two elders and the trap-mouthed constable. They eyed us briefly, crossed the square, disappeared.

I asked about them.

"They are the curfew patrol."

"Why is there a curfew?"

His control was great. He never moved a muscle. Which was a mistake, because only masks are immobile. I had really surprised him. I should have felt triumphant.

He managed to drop the mask and look grave and interested.

"It is needed. Perhaps where you come from it is ... not needed?"

"Only in extraordinary circumstances."

"Unfortunately, we have the need."

I thought with mechanical lechery, *Especially in the spring*? but didn't say it. In a situation demanding elaborate orchestrations of politeness I had been about as smooth as a fist in the teeth.

"You have been most forgiving," I told him. "I have imposed on you."

"The contrary, you have been helpful. But now forgive me, I must join the patrol."

I apologized if I had made him miss his evening meal. He said it

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was nothing. He had recovered all his composure. We were neither friends nor enemies. He was just someone I didn't know.

A man was waiting at the stockade gate to let me out.

The camp's silence was almost unnerving.

We dined drearily on Speed Rations. Then Hill went up to the radio shack for evening check-off, and I took a quart of coffee up to the office.

In the spring, a young man's fancy.

In the dark morass of the lake bed, a young man's fancy.

The statistical predictions of survey composites offer data for verification. They don't prepare the emotions or affect the half-conscious preconceptions that draw nourishment from human fears and needs and hopes ....

I could tell myself I had brought no preconceptions to this job, but —.

Men dream. When the pressures of a crowded ant-hill Earth grow too heavy, many yearn for the simple existence of the pioneer. Sometimes a few even emigrate to a frontier world. But most dream quiet dreams of a past where hardy souls harvested an abundant world with homemade tools, history and myth and fiction coalescing into an idyl of bucolic wonderment.

The cave man ancestor struck flake blades from a flint core and brought down game for his mate and offspring. He drank spring water. His world was free. He owed no debts. He learned to sow and harvest, bake bread, make wine. His sons grew tall and strong, untrammeled by webs of Oedipal resentment and desire. They gave him no cause to contemplate appointments with a psychiatric cosmetician. His wife was never frigid. She didn't need a girdle.

It was a nice idea. Until you came to Lakeside.

I wondered, stopping in at Clellan's lab, if man's neuroses weren't older than his use of fire.

The Kohlman unit hummed. A glowing orange light meant the testing and programming were done, the preservation process under way. The timer showed eight hours to run. I picked up some material Clellan had left for me and went back outside and locked the door.

The edged night wind rustled by, vital with a world's dark promise, bringing the smell of rains, rich humus, the fragrance of life's vigor. The first moon spun over the farthest hills, a coin of light too small to cast a shadow ....

There was a world to recapture the human idyl. Then what had happened? And unity! Man, in all the diversity that made him great,

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seemed destined to yammer for a stultifying unity like a baby for the breast, age after age, in world after world, and it took the often-frantic maneuvering of a handful of dissenters to keep diversity alive.

I congratulated myself on being a dissenter. Next time I saw Greiner, I would send him for a six-week stay in cosmetic surgery. After all, I could always get work; Marsmines was always hiring semiskilled labor, and ....

In my office I turned on the light and dropped into my camp chair, congratulating myself on not being that kind of a dissenter. I poured coffee and laced it from the flask in my desk and studied the feeling that I had dug a hole and was using my professional skill with a shovel to pull the dirt back in on top of me. I drained the coffee cup and poured and powered another, and the feeling grew less uncomfortable.

The day had been a puzzle. There had been no time to sort the pieces out.

Segment One: What had gotten under my skin? Greiner, obviously. Reed, for no discernible reason beyond mutual dislike, probably originating in our both needing a vacation. Danela, for showing us another enigma and being a haunting biological distraction. Reed, again, for pointing that out.

Segment Two: The missing words. I flipped on the phone, buzzed the radio shack. Hill had already left. I tried the commissary. Reed answered. Behind him I heard rippling music. The Morale Section had had the Transport boys bring us a few new tapes.

I asked for Hill and told him to call Communications Central at Base Camp and get a rush message to Linguistics to track down the Lakeside concepts of religion, magic, and witchcraft. He said he would. "And ask if they've found a word for rape."

"What?" Hill said.

"Rape."

He laughed, stopped abruptly. "Okay," he said dubiously. I heard him leave and reminded myself that he was a good multipurpose technician. I switched off.

Segment Three: Foris. What had prompted today's greater frankness? Or had he been lying? Why had the curfew question hit him so hard?

Which led in a straight line to Segment Four: Morality.

There is no human society without an ethical value system. It may be implied or explicit, relative or absolute, puritanical or permissive — but it's there, serving well or badly to adjudicate between social necessity and unreflected impulse.

Segment Five: The body.

I thought about it awhile before calling the commissary again.

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"Intermission. Turn that tape off and get some five-thousand-watt floods out of storage. We're going digging."

Two bodies might prove twice the problem one was. It was a gamble.

Reed, his face sardonic and fatigue-lined, lit a cigarette.

"You're just lucky, Beck. They might have buried them separately."

"Two graves are twice as hard to dig."

"Why not just throw 'em in together?" Andersen leaned over from above, his hands on the edge of the cut. His eyes had a vague half-stunned look.

Hill said, "Maybe they weren't buried at the same time."

"Or maybe it's improper, male and female sleeping together even underground," Reed said unpleasantly. "Some price to pay for bastardy. If Beck's right."

"He's lucky enough to be right," Andy said.

"Okay," I said. "Let's haul this thing out."

The second body had lain scant inches under the sheared-off surface exposed when the diggers had removed the peat block containing the first one. Without their powered equipment, the job of raising the second block was a two-hour exercise in improvisation, but we finally hauled the water-logged mass to the surface on a big wide-mesh sieve and dragged it free of the cut.

At least the buggy had a power drop leaf, and so we didn't have to muscle it to truck bed level. We drove up to the lab and there, under the surgical light, cleared the body enough to discover a boy of seventeen or eighteen who had died the same way his girl friend had. Then we repacked the peat around him. Tomorrow we'd call Clellan for instructions.

Around midnight we headed for the showers. Reed was still all edges, and Andersen appeared to be slipping into a kind of emotional torpor. I hoped it was tiredness. They went to the commissary for a nightcap. Relaxed but inwardly unquiet, I went up to the radio shack.

With the extension of Camp Four's activities, their Communications had been put on a round-the-clock schedule. I checked the frequency in the fax-printed directory, punched it into the board.

A bored voice said, "Sub-Base One."

"Who?"

"Sub-Base Camp One. Used to be Camp Four."

I sneered silently.

"This is Beck, Camp Two. Can you find Loman for me?"

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He could. It only took a moment, then Loman said cheerfully, "Hi. How's it going?"

"Don't ask. Hear you found some records."

"Routine logs, a town layout, a few maps. This wasn't a desert then, just on the edge of one. It looks as though a growing water shortage forced them to evacuate."

"How long was the place lived in?"

"Who knows? Five hundred years minimum. We haven't been able to gauge how much of the deterioration took place after they moved out."

"And the ship — the ark?"

"Dismantled in orbit and ferried down in peices, some components reassembled for colony use, all standard procedure. There's evidence of trouble with the nuclear reactor. They may have lost it early. That might have set them back a bit, but there's no sign of any drastic reversal."

"Metal use?"

"Standard. A couple of semi-automated mines within three kilometers, duralloy artifacts made from chunks of the ship in the latest levels."

"Last request: a population estimate."

A pause. He sighed noisily.

"Listen, Johnny. If you need an estimate on what my estimate is going to be ... you're in trouble. But so far .. there's no sign the place was overcrowded."

"Let me know if you learn anything about their dispersal plans."

"Sure. Glad to."

I signed off, punched Base Camp and got Donovan the night operator, asked if there was anything for me from Linguistics. He said yes, Linguistics told me to go to hell, we were all on Safety Schedule Green, which meant working nonemergency hours and they'd get to my problem in the morning.

What I thought of Linguistics raised a laugh. I said good night and signed off and went outside.

By now the second moon was up, full and heavy. The wind slid across the land, carrying the agonizing weight of the night's richness, excited, clamoring. It was the most sensuous night I had ever known. It prickled my skin, disturbed forgotten dreams ....

Witch: an initiate into a religion deemed subversive to the established order and to the society supporting it, consecrated to the accomplishment of evil as defined by that society, and endowed with supernatural powers as a result of submission to the anti-god.

That was Anthro's overview. I needed the specific Terran application.

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Some authorities derived the word from wit. A witch had knowledge — of herbs and medicines and magic, of the secrets of the forest and the earth and the night, accumulated in the longest unbroken ritual in the life of the race. *Witch: the practicing inheritor of an ancient fertility cult that survived among peasant populations from the heart of the Neolithic into the Industrial Age.*

The witch had only gradually become an object of loathing. A new, austere faith, backed by civil power, had branded the peasant faith demonic. Even so, it was not force but one Enlightenment too many that put an end to it.

What knowledge was lost with the witches? The dark Earth forces they had worshipped seemed very much alive now on this alien world, alive and personal and concerned, crowding in and telling me in the secret voices of the night that not every goal could be attained through discipline and will, that life had a pattern to create, that I had only to open my mind and senses to perceive that pattern and let what would happen happen to fulfill myself. The voices promised a communion with all life that would end forever the awful aloneness of the isolated self, a life that would not be a search for meaning because it held and was meaning in and of itself.

It was a seductive message, the kind of emotionalism my training should have inured me to. Classically, it was in people of Lakeside's cultural level that it evoked the strongest response. But down the line of hillocks the village lay enclosed in its stockade, split into fragments by stone walls, barred doors, tight-laced windows, while the patrol of elders and the stone-faced constable prowled the narrow alleys...

What had their world done to them?

I shook the night off.

In the office I skimmed the material Clellan had left me. His anthropometric study of Danela showed only that she was a perfect modern human type about sixteen years old. Her EEG showed her free from certain psychoses. He had scribbled a profane apology for not being more helpful. I wished he were still here.

But he was five hundred kilometers away, at Sub-Base One. At least raising Camp Four to sub-base status meant a fully staffed station three hundred kilometers closer, with its own Military contingent ....

I needed fifty men, transportation, time. Also sleep. The two bodies rose in my mind and hung in nightmare suspension, the girl's tight brown hand clutching a useless metal rivet ....

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I shuddered, and told myself it was fatigue.

From the camp, the older horn of the crescent of mounds ran due west between the base of the plateau and the old lakeshore. The mounds petered out. The lake bed continued for five hundred meters; then the ground began to rise in a great stepped swelling separated from the plateau by a meandering valley.

Farther west, beyond the plateau, ravines hooked and twisted down into wilderness. From one of these a fast narrow stream had cut its way to a tilted step of land where it entered a calm, almost circular basin, spilling over the rim in a broad spraylike fall that soon collected into a replica of the parent stream above. It might have been a natural lake, a quarry, an ore pit ....

Reed and I took the buggy to where the elfin forest pressing up from the ravines became too dense for driving. Then we hiked, with gnarled trees on one side and rockfalls and crevices and slitted caves on the other, and by midmorning were looking down a slope that ended at the water's edge.

Clouds lay like slabs of marble across the quiet sky, but the sun was warm and trees that seemed only faintly alien threw inviting green shadows on the water. I looked forward to the swim.

A swim was all I got. The water was icy, clear, empty, and nowhere more than six meters deep. As a lake, this one was young and virginal but destined to silt up and become just a swampy pause in the stream's downhill progress. I surfaced and crawled ashore and told Reed. He swore, stripped, and got into the diving mask to see for himself. By the time he was satisfied the morning was gone.

I sat down and tore open a package of Speed Rations while Reed dressed. We would check out the basin's neighborhood, but we would most likely end up chalking off a wasted day.

Reed, a bar of protein concentrate in one fist and a fruit bar in the other, had wandered to the edge of the falls that emptied the lake. He took a bite from one bar and then from the other as though trying to taste which was which and apparently not succeeding. Then he pitched both of them into the trees and knelt to drink from his cupped hand, picked his way over the rim at the edge of the falls and disappeared.

I had a leisurely lunch. I tried the experiment with the protein and the fruit bars as an exercise in normalcy, with the usual negative result, finished both as an exercise in discipline. I took a drink from

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the lake. I dried my face and lit a cigarette and wandered to the edge of the falls and looked down.

Reed looked up at me, streaked with black mud and looking savagely triumphant.

"Get my pack and get down here."

His pack held the digging and sampling tools. I got it and passed it down, then followed him downstream to where a long-dead tree had fallen across the stream, damming and rerouting it. He led me down the new channel to where the stream dropped abruptly to a muddy fan and disappeared.

The mud was streaked with moss and tracked up by Reed's footprints. Rivulets ran down it, gathering at its base in green pools. We got down to it. The air was damp and still. The only sound was the ring of water on the rocks and pebbles it had washed clean falling on them.

Also washed clean was a canted timber beam, visibly cracked and rotting, that jutted from the mud at the base of the falls. Below it, behind it, the water vanished into empty blackness.

Reed knelt in the mud and falling water, reached a hand up under the timber. It came back black and grainy.

He stood up. "Whatever's inside that hill, before they buried it — they burned it."

"Aren't you jumping to conclusions?"

"What'll you give to find out?"

"A few hours' work." But first we'd have to divert the stream. I took a couple of blasting cartridges and the radio-remote detonator from his pack.

"One last question, Beck. Do we do this right? Or fast?"

"Fast."

I followed the stream back to the dam, set a minimal charge and triggered it. Pebbles, moss, mud and chunks of waterlogged wood rose and collapsed sluggishly back into the stream and along its banks. I climbed past the falls for the other pack, the one with the portable radio, and by the time I returned the stream was flowing freely along its old channel. I hurried down to Reed and called Andy on the portable — I had told them to keep within earshot — and explained what we were doing. He said they'd seen no villagers all day. I signed off and we got to work.

The canted beam had been the lintel over a tunnel entrance. Soon we could shine a light under it into black recesses and identify what looked like an ore car against which falling timbers had braced themselves. The water had washed the downward-sloping floor clear, exposing the rusted tracks the car had ridden on. I broke all the rules by crawling inside, poking a light

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ahead of me. Beyond the ore car the evidence of fire diminished and the tunnel was in good repair. Between the tracks lay tumbled bones, a human skeleton disturbed by the inrushing stream water. A rusted iron ax head was still embedded in the skull.

I crawled out into daylight. Reed, who had called me a damn fool before I went in, called me one again. I agreed. I fumbled a cigarette into my mouth and beeped the camp.

"So the fire was confined to the head of the tunnel," Reed muttered. "Fire, a partly collapsed roof, a broken lintel. Could there have been an explosion?"

"At the entrance?"

"Could've been set deliberately to close the operation." He gnawed his lip. "But why?"

"A lab crew could tell us if there was an explosion." I pushed the radio's beeper again.

"A lab crew, sure. Have Hill relay you to Greiner and ..."

He stopped. I held down the beeper.

"No answer?"

I switched to the frequency of the main system in the shack. No carrier wave. I tried the emergency frequency and turned the direction finder through 360 degrees. No homing beam. The transmitter was dead.

Thirty seconds later we were on our way. We left the equipment where we had dropped it. We left the underwater gear at the edge of the calm green lake. For all I know it's still there.

We stopped the buggy two hundred meters short of the camp.

Reed had been silent all the way. His angular profile was set, and a sheen of sweat glinted under his eyes.

He said tightly, "What d'you think?"

"I'm not a complete trusting idiot. I brought a machine pistol."

We got out of the buggy, and I shoved the gun into the top of my pants. Reed unclipped the rifle from its rack behind the seat and slung it across his shoulders.

"Orders, chief?"

"We'd better approach the camp from the top."

The rise to the plateau ended in a low vertical cliff. We clambered up a funnel-shaped crack and clawed our way out onto the undulating surface. It was an erratic oval, patched with scrubby trees. Beyond the camp it dropped into a sharp ravine from which rose the gentle slopes leading to the High Meadow grazing grounds. We walked to where we could get a clear view down into the camp.

The prefabs looked deserted. The window at the back of the radio shack was open, and I

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thought the dispensary door stood ajar. Below the prefabs, through the trees, the dig was a quiet ruin of half-exposed walls and stepped levels of soil deposits partially removed. On the far side, an insignificant mark and a couple of hand sieves with a pick propped against them showed where Hill and Andersen had begun a new cut.

Reed unslung the rifle and released the safety, and we advanced to where the cliff became the slope down which we had worn the footpath. From here we had a better view of the hill beyond the ravine. Nothing moved.

Nothing moved in the camp either. Farther down, beyond the violated mound and out on the flat, the cut we had taken the bodies from looked narrow and stark as a surgical scar. Only the wind moved across the land, serene, disturbing.

I pulled the gun from my pants top, and Reed followed me down. I held the gun pointed at the ground, an unfamiliar weight. We approached the rear of the radio shack.

Reed waited, holding the rifle at waist level. I peered inside.

The back of the Communications console hid much of the interior. But across the shack the door stood open. Upended by it lay the recording crystal rack that belonged on the shelf by the operator's left hand. The half-dozen crystals it had held were scattered across the floor. Sunlight, filtering through the trees shading the front of the shack, dappled a slanting patch of floor, a foot, a lower leg in field pants.

I squeezed my shoulders through the window, laid the pistol on the console and shoved myself over the sill. Now I could see Andersen lying wedged into the corner formed by the console and a storage cabinet, face hidden, not breathing.

I dropped to the floor, picked up the pistol. Avoiding the patch of light thrown through the door, I went to the downhill window.

The prefabs below presented dark windows like secretive eyes. The dispensary door stood a meager inch from latching. A small army could hide down here ....

Reed had followed me through the window, now stood guard while I looked at Andy.

I felt for a heartbeat because it's one of the hopeful automatic things you do, hauled him clear of the corner, rolled him onto his back. A patch of dried blood matted the hair at the left side of his forehead, and below it a dark depression marked the lower edge of the wound.

"Well?" Reed said.

"He wasn't pitchforked."

He said something harsh, but I

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was studying the board.

Someone must have fallen against it, scattering the crystals and changing the setting of three keys. One had turned off the transmitter. Another had opened the mike. The board itself was still on. The call-back signal was still on automatic and, if a call came in, would reproduce Hill's unemotional voice identifying the camp and asking the caller to record a message. With the transmitter off, no one would hear it. The recording key had been pushed from *Auto* to *Manual On*, and above it a small yellow light showed that a crystal was waiting to be listened to.

It could wait awhile longer. I switched on the transmitter, reset the board on full automatic. "Let's go on down."

Reed left the window. I stepped into the doorway.

We started down toward the lab, the dorm, the commissary and utility building, keeping well apart. I licked salt from my lips and made myself move slowly.

The sound, an indefinable one, came from the dispensary. The door began to open.

Reed moved the barrel of the rifle half a centimeter and fired on full automatic, and the door blew apart in a burst of yellow flashes. Someone reeled back from it, and the flashes sparked more brightly in the darker interior.

By the time I had shouted something desperate and unintelligible, the thunder was only an echo, and a shape framed by the doorway slid down the opposite wall. Then I was running. Reed almost screamed, "Watch it!" but I had recognized the man he'd fired at.

I stopped in the doorway. My ears rang hideously and spent explosive burned my throat. Something moved at the edge of my vision, beyond the open door to the infirmary, but for now I was paralyzed, my gut a pit of helpless fury and frustration, because the ruined thing on the floor was the blood - and smoke-scarred body of Hill.

When I turned I was swearing, but Reed didn't hear. He was raising his rifle, cooler now, more economical. He fired two singles. A villager running diagonally down the hill sprouted flames between his shoulder blades and pitched onto his face, sliding, rolling, while something I thought was an elder's staff went flying in an arc ahead of him.

Reed whirled, said something like, "Got that son of a bitch too," but I couldn't be sure because I was yelling that he'd shot Hill and to put the goddamn gun down. His eyes swiveled toward the radio shack, and I saw him thumb the control from single to auto. I was

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an arm's length away when he said, "There's another behind there," and laid a burst across the front of the shack and beyond.

I grabbed him as a sprinting figure fell and came hurtling down the hill in a flailing bundle of arms and legs and skirts. Reed turned and lunged, and I caught the rifle butt under my ribs. I let go, tried to suck a lungfull of air. Pain like a knife stabbed into my chest. He started aiming the gun again, and so I clubbed him with the pistol butt.

He went down soggily, without a sound.

I looked at the gun I had hit him with. It looked like a hell of a silly instrument to lug around, and so I threw it aside. I could barely breathe but only hurt enough for misery. I picked up the rifle, pulled off the magazine and threw it after the pistol and jerked the live shell out of the breech.

Sweating, I climbed up to where Danela had slid to a stop just up the hill. Her legs sprawled out from the bunched folds of her skirts. They were slim and sturdy but very white, as though never exposed to sunlight. A scorched smell came from the almost-oaks by the radio shack and tiny smoke plumes limped upward from the trampled weeds and grasses of the hill she had fallen down. I hadn't thought I might have spoiled Reed's aim completely, saw with surprise that she was still breathing. She had picked up dust and twigs and a smear of mud across her nose, but except for a skinned knee there was no blood on her at all.

I knelt beside her. Her eyes opened, bright with terror. She sat up convulsively, and I thought she was going to run. Instead she swept her skirts down to her ankles, at once reached up to arrange the cap covering her hair. Then something happened. Just what I wasn't sure, but her fingers stilled in the middle of the automatic process, and her eyes grew empty. Then, tugging at the bands under her chin, she pulled them free, and the cap fell away and dark hair fell softly around her shoulders. She sat looking at me with wide dark empty eyes.

For a while I wondered what expression would return to fill them. Then she began pulling her skirts up into her lap and lay back against the tilting ground.

My bloodstream buzzed in my ears. Then Reed moaned somewhere. I got up and turned and saw him on hands and knees, dragging the rifle and feeling through the damp leaf and fiber carpet for the magazine I'd thrown away.

"You silly bastard," I said. "That was Hill in there. Hill!"

He lurched unsteadily to his feet.

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"You hit me." He reached a hand to the back of his head. His whole face quivered. He hadn't heard a word I said. "You're crazy. You fouled this whole thing up from the start, and now you're crazy. I ought..."

He started to pick up the rifle and got both hands on it. I had a horrible sense of uselessness and loss. If I hadn't fouled things up, I had made a few mistakes, and Reed had proved more brittle than I had thought possible and was now approaching with bleak hatred on his face, starting to swing the empty rifle.

His movements were slow, dreamlike. When I hit him he made a high sick sound and catapulted backward, fell, rolled a little, lay still....

Danela had raised up on one elbow, her skirts up and her look both hungry and watchful. She had been only a nuisance, an object of casual lust; then an irritating part of the Lakeside enigma. But she had been shot at and skinned her knee and had never run bare-legged along the summer lakeshore. She had hiked up her skirts in invitation or bribe. She was a human being, unique and irreplaceable. She mattered as much as any of us.

I retrieved the pistol and crammed it into a hip pocket. I managed to pick Reed up, staggered with him through the lab, dumped him on a cot in the still-darkened infirmary. Breath rasped quietly in his throat.

Vagrant light coming through from the outside showed the rumpled, slept-on condition of one of the other cots. Hill had been here, of course. With Danela? — I remembered the blur of someone running out into the lab seconds after the rifle fire that killed him....

Questions would come later. Meantime, I could make sure Reed did no more damage. I found sedatives in a supply cupboard and shot a stiff dose into his arm, almost envying him the sleep he'd be having.

When I went back outside, the girl had disappeared.

I found the magazine, brought it and rifle back into the lab, ran cold water into the sink and put my head under it.

Delayed reaction came with cramping nausea and a violent allover sweat. I gripped the sides of the sink and listened to my bones rattle. It was a standard reminder of human vulnerability, and when it was over I felt human, vulnerable, and angry. I toweled impatiently and got a cigarette out with shaking fingers and sat on a stool and waited for the shaking to stop.

I was going to have to report in.

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But I'd been good, obeyed the rules, turned down Danela's offer. So the rules owed me one. So I wouldn't call Base until I'd had a chance to learn what had happened here. Greiner would flay me for not going by the book, but he was going to flay me anyway. Besides, I'd never had blind faith in the book. I had even less, now that strict adherence to it might make me an easier patsy.

I dropped the cigarette into the sink. I closed and locked the door into the dispensary, managing not to see what lay behind it, went out through the lab and locked up every building in the camp and started out across the hill.

It didn't take long to find the body of the villager Reed had shot: one of the elders from last night's curfew patrol. I looked for his staff, found a pitchfork instead. I retrieved the buggy and loaded body and pitchfork on it and drove back to camp.

The body I transferred to a lab work table. Then, because an explosive bullet does a lot of damage, I swabbed down the truck bed, stripped and showered and put on a clean shirt and pants. A search through storage produced a holster for the pistol, which I strapped on, feeling silly. Finally, because I couldn't put it off any longer, I went into the dispensary.

The last red afternoon sunlight came straight through the shattered door. I made myself take in details.

A surgical dressing — slapped on in careless speed or desperation — covered half the left side of Hill's head. In the sink, bloodstains had spattered the spilled contents of a general issue Medikit. He must have treated himself. But how had he been hurt? An accident? I thought of Andy, dead in the radio shack. Certainly they hadn't fought each other. An attack by villagers?

Outside again, I went up the hill.

Shadows had gathered in the radio shack. I snapped on the light. Andersen looked irritable in death. The yellow light on the console reminded me of the waiting message. The board, at least, was still working. Reed's gunfire had taken out the window and punched through the downhill wall, but each bullet had exploded on impact, and the equipment was well enough shielded to survive flying splinters. No radio would have meant no evening check-off, a call from Base I couldn't answer, and a Military contingent here within an hour of check-off deadline.

The Military would come anyway, to conduct the formal investigation. What their rule book would do to the fragile relationship we had built up with the villagers, guilty or innocent, didn't bear

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bear thinking about.

I touched the playback key. The light winked out. The speaker cleared its throat.

"Base Camp to Camp Two. Attention: Beck. From: Marton, Linguistics. Be reasonable. We've enabled you to talk to the natives, but the refinements will have to wait. However, we've found no equivalents for rape, magic or witchcraft. Make sense of that. Now what follows is tentative, but maybe it'll give you a clue to whatever you think you're looking for. At Lakeside, religion is a vague concept. The word derives from the archaic Terran according to the observed pattern but has undergone subtle shifts of meaning. We get indications that fear may be the dominant affect. The word evil usually has a religious coloring. Off the cuff, I get the feeling that here religion has an evil one. Any use? Either way, we'd like your follow-up. See you. Message ends."

I heard the audio tone that had cued out the recording. The playback snapped off — and on again. The crystal held a later message.

"*—goddamn fool,*" Hill's voice said furiously over a thud and scuffling sounds. "*Andy, listen! It was her idea, now give me that before...*"

The struggle came in sharp detail. A wrenching gasp. A shuddering sound of pain and blind fury. More struggle, a decisive *thump* — a crash, then heavy footsteps blundered off into silence, and a girl's voice began calling Hill's name, following him, fading beyond the microphone's range.

I didn't believe it.

The shack was still.

After listening to the recording a second time, I still didn't believe it. But after the third time, I had to.

A spilled crystal crunched underfoot. The crystal rack lay where I had seen it from the window. I picked it up, found a dry smear of blood on the base.

...So they had fought each other, after all.

At some time Hill must have come up to check the receiver crystal. And later Andy — perhaps wanting company, perhaps curious about word from Base or the length of Hill's absence — had followed and found him *inflagrante* with the girl from the village. Sex with the locals: contra policy. Who knew what else it was in Andy's mind, or what had been going on under his surface of stunned quietude...

If the situation had been reversed, I thought, Hill would have claimed next rights and waited his turn. Andersen couldn't. He got rough. Someone fell against the console, activating the recorder. Andy picked up the nearest weapon, the crystal rack, and

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almost took Hill's ear off. Then Hill got it away from him and used it more efficiently, and Andersen died.

It made the same sense as Reed's blasting the dispensary door.

...A lot of people would enjoy an orgy of denunciation when they learned that an Anthro field man had killed another over a primitive.

It wouldn't matter that it hadn't — at least consciously — been for possession of the primitive. The pertinent details wouldn't matter at all. They wouldn't be exciting enough to head news flashes or rake in votes. Too many people had interests to promote.

Greiner's reaction — and Reed's, when he woke up — would be only a start. Whatever the Military investigators recommended, there would be a service Committee of Inquiry to face. Anthro might or might not drop the ax over Greiner's neck and mine, but we were only minnows. By then the sharks would be tearing Anthro to pieces. Facts would be mere grist for the rumor mills of rewrite staffs and public relations firms. When public interest — carefully whipped up in every human center some others — reached a climax, the Terran legislature would go into action. The economy bloc would assault Anthro's appropriation. There would be a diversionary attack on the Medical section that administered the annual psych tests supposed to keep out the unstables. This would involve vote trading with the private medicine group. The Military would revive its campaign to have Anthro put under direct Military control, and the Neanderthals of repressive morality would start yelling again to have field personnel rendered posthypnotically asexual. It had only failed last time because some top brass had feared the Military might be included and had graphically pictured the mutiny they predicted would ensue. Only cynics had accused them of more personal concerns. This time, they might have to arrange an incident — and blame Anthro's lack of Military-type discipline for starting the whole business.

I started to punch in a call to Base Camp. But didn't. I checked the call-back recording with Hill's voice on it, inserted a new receiver crystal, made sure the board was on full automatic.

I was thinking about my neck and nothing else right then.

The sun disappeared behind low crimson clouds.

I killed a fruitless hour looking for Danela and got back to camp after dark. After eating a few cold Speed Rations, I returned to the lab.

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There, meticulously, I went through the dead elder's effects. His shirt needed washing. His belt was leather, with thong ties instead of a buckle. A pouch hanging from it held the remains of a meal of bread and cheese, a length of twine, a pressure-flaked flint knife that had taken skill and hours to fashion. The pitchfork was wooden, the two tines driven through holes in a crosspiece and lashed with rawhide. Not as strong as a metal fork but just as deadly as a weapon.

Had Foris lied when he said the pillory provided Lakeside's only means of execution? If so, why? To conceal the other means? Or to conceal the crime it was reserved for? And the peat victims: murder, or execution? I had suspected execution, but didn't a jealousy murder fit the facts as neatly? What about the metal object found with the first body? If it was execution, was it part of the crime? Could I *assume* it was execution?

I assumed it. Nothing startling happened. So I gave up and walked through the aphrodisiac night to the radio shack with a blanket to spread over Andersen's body. The Millitary would be here inside an hour.

I punched the Base frequency.

"Beck to Central."

"Beck," the loudspeaker said in a bored voice. Not Donovan's. He wouldn't be on for an hour or so. "Camp Two?"

"Camp Two, evening check-off. I want to record."

"Get off it, Beck. You know the routine." I heard the snick of a timer punching a check card; then behind me the door opened.

I turned and snatched at the gun in its unaccustomed holster while the loudspeaker said something I didn't catch. Danela came in, closed the door softly, stood with her dark hair falling freely past her shoulders and her cap a twisted bundle in her hands. Her empty waiting look was gone, replaced by excitement, anticipation.

The speaker snapped, "Beck? You gone to sleep?"

I signaled her to keep quiet.

"Sorry. Something's come up. I'll call back."

"You do that," he said, as though it were a crushing retort, and switched off.

Danela smiled slowly, her unpainted soft mouth a rosy curve around even white teeth.

I said, feeling dangerously awkward, "You ran away this afternoon."

"There was so much noise; then you were gone so long. I was afraid they might find me. So I hid until dark."

"They'll search here anyway."

"Not now. Not even the elders

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may be outside the stockade after curfew."

"But you may?"

Her face came up, reckless and secret. She was half the atavist dream come true. If I hadn't spent six weeks at Lakeside, I might have thought she was all of it. Her voice had sunk to the cobweb rustle I had heard yesterday.

"I don't care. I'm not one of *them* any more."

She crossed to the console, dropped her cap on it, and from a deep patch pocket in her skirt she took something wrapped in a surgical compress from one of our Medikits. Then something about the console arrested her attention, and I felt myself gripped in that inexorable unhurried calm some dreams have as a prelude to fright. Her hand went to the control panel, like a caress explored the dials' bright faces, the plastic-tipped keys and concave-topped buttons, came to rest on the smooth cold curve of the casing where it dropped to the recess that made room for the board operator's legs.

I said, "Because of you three men died this afternoon."

A frown. Puzzled, impatient. A gesture at the blanket.

"Is that one? — the dark one, with the thin face?"

When I nodded, she sighed, shrugged, quickly confirmed my reconstruction. She had then followed Hill to the dispensary, watched helplessly while he dressed his wound and found a sleeping needle and put it in his arm. He had dropped onto a cot and apologized and said he would waken soon, that the medications would have worked by then, that she wasn't to worry. She had sat on the floor by his head...

"And when he woke up?"

"He said he must speak to you. He got up and left the room and the fire and noise began. I ran away through the window."

I waited for some sign of sorrow or compassion.

She said, "Did you kill him?"

"No. Reed did. It was an accident."

She giggled knowingly. A damp prickling began at the nape of my neck. I said thickly, "Aren't you sorry?"

"It is the way." Her face held a strange wonderment. "As I was taught. Don't you understand? Now I'm one of *you?*"

The words echoed under my skull. She hesitated a moment, unwrapped the bundled compress, took out an emergency hypo. It must have been the one Hill had used. Her movements were experimental and obsessive. The tip of her tongue came out and lingered against her upper lip.

She brought up her left hand, fingers extended. The needle

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caught the light brightly. She put the point against the tip of her index finger and pushed. Her tongue disappeared. Small teeth clamped on her lower lip and breath sucked harshly around them. The needle came away leaving a tiny ruby globe.

She studied it without hurry. It began to spread. When I spoke my voice sounded flat and matter of fact, the way she looked, as though we had all the time in the world.

"Why?"

"To learn. To live forever."

A long way off I knew that no one lives forever, but there was something unfinished about the ritual with the hypo. She found out what it was and brought her hand to my mouth and ran the fingertip along my lower lip, against my teeth.

I tasted blood. She took her hand away slowly. I took the hypodermic from her and laid it on the console and held both her hands.

"No one lives forever."

"That's what they say. They even say the god is dead, they killed it..." She rested her cheek against my hands. "I had never been touched by a man, not until yesterday, when I was afraid and ignorant and silly..."

"Is it forbidden to touch?"

"Even to speak of it except to teach the young."

"One of the men who died this afternoon was ... one of your elders."

"I saw. He must have been spying, to see if I would betray myself as one of you."

"...Who are we, Danela?"

It was the top of my head talking. The rest of me was as caught up in the crooked fascination of her half-conscious fantasy as she was. She looked up.

"The Old Ones. The ones who killed. The ones who loved." She freed a hand, put it to my face. There was a sound outside. Only the breeze moving the leaves. It died after a moment, as if to point out that this time there would be no interruption: life had a pattern to create, and for everything that happened there was always time enough. She caressed the scratches she had left under my eye, rested her palm at the side of my neck where a pulse hammered. I felt the touch of her lips in the open throat of my shirt.

Talking was like going through a twenty-g lift-off.

"Do you ... do you have a religion?"

"Of course!"

"...Tell me about it."

Count three. Her eyes were bright. Then she drew a breath and arched her neck and laughed, an upwelling of joy so absolute that it sent a chill crawling over my skin.

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"No. I'll *show* you."

From here the lake descended in long successive waves back to the lake bed. Beyond shadowed undulations I could just locate the camp by the outline of the plateau above it. To the right the deeper darkness was virgin timber covering hills that merged with immeasurable distance and finally the sky. There were few clouds. Otherwise the night was like last night, silent but for the wind that moved the upland grasses. The lesser moon was out of sight, the larger high, three-quarters full. Moonlight gave the land a touch of infinity, and Danela's face gave infinity a focus.

In a scrub-grown depression she bent to remove an armload of dead brush and pointed downward. In camp I had stopped long enough to grab a jacket and a lamp, now snapped its light on narrow beam.

It entered a triangular opening, bounded off slanting rock. She searched the brush, found a length of knotted rawhide. One end had been secured somewhere. She tugged, testing its hold, then dropped the coil through the opening.

She slid in after it. A moment later her voice echoed up. I hooked the lamp to my belt and squeezed in after her.

Three meters down I stood braced between her and cold granite on the tilted floor of a hollow as narrow as a coffin. She wriggled down to hands and knees, and I unhooked the lamp and watched her crawl out of sight. I followed through an angled crack and emerged into echoing space.

Light from the lamp slanted across flat rock that tipped suddenly, fractionally, with a sound like breaking bone. It had the rippled surface of a mallet-and-chisel finish. On it a flint-and-tinder pouch and the stub of a tallow candle threw clumsy shadows onto a mass of tumbled rock. Danela was kneeling beside me, guiding the lamp in my hand.

It bridged black space, struck vertical rock. She tilted it down. An arrowhead of emptiness narrowed down between the wall and the mass that fell away from the stone beneath us, and in the lowest visible section of the wall a triangular patch shone back a liquid blue.

"The sky," she said, and was on her way down.

I joined her. A rattle of loose stones followed me, and I imagined the whole uncertain mass settling and obliterating us. Instead, the noisy pebbles were swallowed up in black interstices, and the one sound was the steady whisper of her breathing. I remembered to breathe too, and she dropped to her knees and pulled me down, and we

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slid like lizards into the belly of the hill we had just come down, a mountain of slabs and rocks and beams, here filled with shale and infertile damp soil, here empty, washed out or left empty by the hill's creation.

I caught a flash of reflecting blue again; we were below the obstruction that had hidden it. We clambered downward through the maze, and then she stopped me.

Her eyes were enormous.

"There."

An arm's length away, bronzed men in canoes stood with poised nets, and the lake was a silver splash receding to the opposite shore.

"A candle ... I only saw it with a *candle* ..."

We angled down across the painted cliff. At times the wall was buried, at others visible only obliquely past the barrier of avalanche. There the signs of fire, and of scouring to remove the soot and grime. Here and there the pigments had peeled or been crusted over with limestone deposits. It hardly mattered, so much was left. My heart hammered at my ribs. I couldn't think. I was only the perceptor of part of the testament of the old Lakeside, before the new had buried it, and the sense of communication was so strong that I might have crawled not into a tomb but through a hole in time to record direct experience. The old reached out and touched the mind, reached inward to an older essence and made the blood race. On this cliff that had once faced the sunrise, old Lakeside had left its magic, its fertility rite, its whole cosmogony.

"Here. This is the *best* place."

I followed her down a vertical chimney, emerged again, saw the wall in a long downward sweep. For a vertiginous moment I was convinced the painted figures moved. The blacksmith's hammer swung. The wrestlers strained. Canoemen pushed off from the shore, children ran, and dark soil turned away from a plow blade. There were voices. From a hunt, from a birth, from a burial. Streams ran red-brown and rain-pocked under a lead-gray sky; the soil embraced the rain, and the clouds, and the sun that came after and streams that ran full and clear, then slimmer, shimmering under the summer sun, now showing, now hiding the quick stream fish, the sleek lake fish nosing upward through the reeds where the stream banks spread; and I felt the shock of the lake to my sun-warmed shin, the joyous pressure of a long deep dive, the buoyancy and drive toward the surface, undimmed sunlight, a quick gulp of air —

The illusion broke. I followed her again, and then we were

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standing on the gullied floor of a hollow shaped like a flattened squat misshapen bell, too large for the light in my fist, darkness bearing down with the weight of the hill on top of us-...

I switched the light to full flood, squinted, heard Danela's shuddering intake of breath.

Here the wall curved inward sharply to help create the bubble we were in, and Danela hadn't been the first to find it. Against the wall a waist-high level had been built of rocks and rubble. On it glinted bent and broken bits of metal which I guessed were duralloy relics of the early colony, and rusted shapes of iron and steel. Above it a swelling in the rockface brought three pictures into prominence and left the rest in shadow. On the left, a harvest golden with dusty haze. Then a pair of lovers. On the right a nursing mother. Infusing all three was a lambent sexuality. It was the reality behind the atavist cliche.

Danela picked up her skirts and climbed onto the level, said in a soft thick voice, "Did they kill it? Did they kill the god?"

"... No."

"And there have always been worshipers, in spite of all their teaching."

"What do they teach?"

"That's for the good, for the dead. They don't even know where the temple is. They say it faced the Spring Morning sunrise, the Old Ones worshipped and made sacrifices, but the rest they teach to deceive the god into thinking it is dead." She began to laugh, a sound like thick honey. "If you keep on about it, I'll leave you and go to the other one, the one you knocked down and put in the house. Or did you kill him, too?"

I said I hadn't killed Reed or anyone and lifted her off her perch. She was laughing again, and when I set her on her feet, the laugh had become a purr deep in her throat.

"What do they teach the children?"

The laugh drifted into silence, died. Her lips parted in the first awareness of bewilderment.

"I have to know. You'll understand later, I promise." I touched her cheek. Sweat ran down my ribs, a quivering chill.

"What do they teach the children?"

Her spirit began to shrivel. In her eyes I saw the glint of tears.

Perhaps she had intended to summarize. And perhaps she did, for a while. But the years of conditioning took effect, each word cuing the one following as she had heard them repeated endlessly through childhood: the Lessons of Infancy, the Lessons of the Second Year, the first of the Proprieties, the Lessons of the Third Year ....

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I had put my jacket around her shoulders. She sat on a tumble of rubble, eyes closed, without personality or sex: a Lakeside child reciting the chronicle of pathology that was the Lakeside's view of man. I heard the Blessings of Peace, the First Specific Proprieties, the start of the History, and a thousand fears of incestuous design and accident, of patricidal rage and matricidal cunning, hovered and descended on great bat wings ...

Lakeside, rejecting freedom as an orgy of violence, a carnival of lust, had chosen absolute, codified control, achieving order through the total suppression of disapproved behavior. Crammed into the deep, unreachable, unacknowledged cellars of the mind, the antisocial potential latent in healthy aggressiveness and sensuality could only grow, producing a counterweight of guilt that could only be held below a conscious suicidal level through projection outward — so that Lakeside barred its doors to keep out the nocturnal attacker, laced its windows to obstruct the voyeur, sent out patrols to seek both in the streets. Spying eyes by day, the patrols and the *imprisoning* stockade by night, took care of the few deviations a cancerous superego could not. Peace was attained through a moral syndrome of self-hate, prohibition and command and folk history interweaving to form a net in which all permissible experience was caught and defined for all time.

... I listened to the nightmare Lessons of the Fourth and Fifth Years, the Specific Proprieties of Sickness and Healing, more of the History ....

Her voice was a whisper. I touched her shoulder. The whisper died, and she began to come back ....

We clambered slowly towards the surface. She was too tired and cold to climb up her knotted rope, and so I boosted her ahead of me. On the hill the air was almost warm. Wild grass and distant blossoms made each breath a drug. I gathered dry brush and built a fire in a hollow while she huddled in my jacket.

"Yesterday," she said. "That girl whose ... the girl you found." The fire crackled. Yellow flames spread comfortingly. "A worshiper can't be killed."

"Is that part of the teaching?"

"No. It's known as a belief of the worshippers. They say it is a false belief, but they say they killed the god, and if the one is untrue, surely the other is too."

"Not necessarily." Perhaps she heard me, perhaps not. It was too complicated to explain now anyway. "What made you come down from High Meadow then?"

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"Because suddenly I knew. The elders always said I showed the signs, the ... disobedience. Even before I found the way into the Temple. That was two autumns ago, when I was working the berry harvest with my family. I went in six times that season and the next. No one ever knew. Then we were told to work at High Meadow, and never came back here.

"Then you arrived, and for weeks the elders could not decide whether or not you were the Old Ones as the History speaks of them. But suddenly, yesterday afternoon ... the tools and things of iron, the way the men looked at me ... Up on High Meadow, along with my flock, suddenly I just *knew*. You were the Old Ones, so I came to you. But the digging was stopped, the men getting ready to leave ... I was very frightened, and suddenly men were running at me, and there was the worshiper, the girl on the table, and she looked dead, but that was impossible. I was confused and afraid."

"And later?"

"When I awoke from the sleep, there was still so much I didn't understand. But in my heart I knew who you were, and that I was one of you."

She laid her face against my chest, without fear, without urgency. I shifted to make her comfortable. She sighed softly and fell asleep. I held her, not exactly a father, not quite a lover, until the fire was dead.

The stars were almost gone. The lesser moon was a bright pearl spinning through a cool gray sky.

On the way back to camp, faintly, we heard the rising horn from the direction of the village.

The camp was deserted.

I blundered into the radio shack, and Danela sat on the doorsill while I called Base.

"Beck to Central."

"Hi," Donovan said. "Kind of early, aren't you?"

"There should be a patrol here. I never made evening check-off."

"Sure you did. You logged in at ..." He made an inarticulate sound. "Your card's punched at 21:05. That fool Heckart stuck it in the rack without telling me you ... What's the problem?"

I told him. He asked if I was in danger. I said I preferred not to take chances.

"There's a Military crew at Sub-Base One," he said. "They're closer than we are. I'll call them."

"I'll call them myself. You rouse the Military commander at Base and tell him he has a formal investigation to conduct."

"Sure, Johnny." His voice burned with curiosity, but he switched off. I called Sub-Base One, asked for the senior Military

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officer, got a lieutenant who tried hard to sound crisp and military though not quite awake. I heard him giving orders. He told me two long-hop beetles would lift off inside three minutes. "Hold on, I'm getting Greiner for you."

I said something unpleasant but agreed to wait. When Greiner came on, his voice was still fogged with sleep, but he had been briefed.

"So you lost two men," he said without preface. "Good work."

"Save it for when it'll do you some good, chief. I discovered what happened to the colony. Interested?"

He sighed deeply, wearily. "Beck, your insubordination doesn't impress me. But d'you mean you've found the cause of the regression?"

"Yes, the fear of witches." I felt suddenly light-headed. "The villagers believe that a long time ago their ancestors worshiped a violent god. It sounds like a myth-distorted fertility god. Its appetites grew so monstrous the people rose up and killed it and took steps to make sure the excesses of its reign could never be repeated."

"That's myth," he snapped. "What's myth got to do with it?"

"Everything," I said, and killed the mike. His voice began rumbling through the speaker, and so I killed that too and walked stiffly to the door. Every joint and muscle had begun to ache, and my eyes were hot and gritty. I took Danela's arm, stood her up and went outside.

The sky over High Meadow had begun to glow. The tiny moon was almost invisible. The light breeze carried a spring morning smell as palpable as a drug. Fatigue, depression — the accumulation of weeks — began at last to drain away. Spring magic. The old reawakening, the procreative urge, the happy concordance of physiology and climate. I grinned down at Danela.

"Let's eat."

In the commissary I did things to the equipment, and the broiler delivered surrogate but succulent bacon and eggs. I drew two coffees. I didn't know how she'd take to the stuff. So I found the refrigerated milk and gave her a glassful with a platter of food and a set of utensils and took one of the coffee cups into the infirmary.

I set it down by Reed's cot, went to the windows and let in the morning.

With a galvanic movement he came upright, eyes wide. Then he saw me. He grunted, drew up his knees and laid his forehead on them. A hand came up, explored the back of his head. Finally he saw the coffee.

"Thanks." He squinted at the nearest window. Suddenly there were shadows outside. The sun was

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climbing over the hill. "Morning. You must've doped me."

"I did."

I told him to take it easy and come over for breakfast when he was ready.

"How about you, Beck? How'd you make out?"

"Well enough, considering. You were right about witchcraft."

He muttered an obscenity and I left.

Outside, slanting shadows lay between patches of golden sunlight. Up the hill, just off the path to the radio shack, Danela stood with the early sun warm on her face and breasts and her dark hair rich and loose about her naked shoulders. Her shirt and a white undergarment hung forgotten from one hand.

It was an affirmation the people of Old Lakeside would have approved of.

I stood very still.

She turned and saw me. I had an inexplicable sense of impending revelation, could only look up at her and strain to sift hallucination from reality.

Unless I imagined it, I felt — out of rhythm with my own, deeper, clearer, more commanding — the vital inward pulse of human possibility.

Maybe the night had had a cathartic function. The means didn't matter, compared with the result. She had stood half naked in the sun and reached out into her world and deep within herself, all barriers down, and found in transfiguring reality what to most of us is only an abstraction.

She was free.

She said, "I looked out and saw the sun coming up."

She began to smile, and the first villager, pitchfork raised, came from behind the radio shack.

Late that afternoon I was in Greiner's office at Sub-Base One.

"You think he's sane?" Greiner asked, smiling.

The medic sighed. "Tired and jumpy, but sane."

"Well," Greiner said comfortably, "get a complete psych report on him, in case the question ever comes up."

The medic curled his lip. He was tall and fair, a captain, deceptively young-looking.

"If you insist." Light coming through the window behind Greiner's desk glinted off the Military Medical insignia on his sleeve. "As to Beck's theory, it's psychologically reasonable and shouldn't be hard to prove — or disprove. After all, it's based in part on physical evidence. But that's outside my field. So if you'll excuse me ..."

"I wish you'd stay," Greiner said. "I'd like your reactions to a

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few details as we go along. As a doctor, I mean. However intuitive, I'm sure they'd have value."

The medic shrugged.

"Because it seems to me," Greiner said as the medic settled back into his chair, "that we have less physical evidence than at first appears. The cliff paintings, the mine by the waterfall, the peat burials. That's all."

His face showed friendly concern. He had been playing this role since I got in from Camp Two. If he could impugn my interpretation of the evidence, he could simply sit back and watch me take the blame for the whole Lakeside fiasco.

I said, "There's enough physical evidence to put into the mythological context. Add the present Lakeside situation, and you have the basis for a hypothesis which, as the captain says, won't be hard to prove or disprove.

"Verification will take time," Greiner said with a smile like a friendly uncle's.

"It has to be done anyway. The History speaks of five villages clustered around the lake, but the exact number doesn't matter. We look for evidence of a dense population gathered in a single culture complex. For evidence of rebellion, violence. We dig the cliff wall painting and see if it could be all or part of the temple that's supposed to have faced the Spring Morning sunrise — more importantly, to make sure it was deliberately and not accidentally concealed, and to see how it was done."

"How would you guess?"

"Manually, piecemeal, sometime after the rebellion; otherwise they'd still have had the facilities to blow the whole thing up."

"What proof have you that there *was* a rebellion? The skeleton in the mine tunnel."

"Added to the evidence of fire and possible explosion and to the account in the History ..."

"Which refers to the murder of a god, the annihilation of a priesthood, and the demolition of a temple," Greiner interrupted. "As related by a juvenile psychopath and nymphomaniac."

"You can check her version of the History with the other villagers," the medic said unexpectedly.

"If we can get them to talk," Greiner said. "Which I doubt, after this morning. I still don't see, Beck, why you don't take a truth shot and clear the whole thing up once and for all."

"There's nothing to clear up. Reed's already submitted to one and verified my story."

"Not all of it. He was unconscious all night and missed much of what happened this

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morning. Hearing gunfire, he said, he left the infirmary by way of the lab in time to see you emptying a machine pistol at a group of fleeing villagers. That's all."

"If you doubt my word, go to the authorities and bring charges."

He smiled gently. "A little paranoid, doctor?"

The medic looked at him reflectively. "I'd call it a normal response for a man who's being pressured into waiving his legal rights."

"Pressured?" Greiner said innocently, and dismissed the subject with a businesslike gesture. "Now Beck claims the original colony here at Sub-Base One moved in a planned migration to the Camp Two area, Lakeside. He adduces his wall paintings to prove a great cultural flowering there. But he goes further. He says they prove a certain philosophic climate, which he needs to complete his hypothesis. You're asking us, Beck, to consider as evidence not the paintings but your subjective respond to them."

"Sure," I said. "Have the captain give you a lecture on the intuitive faculty and its role in art."

He looked at the medic. I hadn't meant the suggestion seriously, but the medic, after throwing me a curious look, took it up. It was all undergrad psych, with citations from classic texts showing similarities of response to one nonverbal art mode in terms of another. I was sure Greiner knew it all, but maybe it needed saying for the record.

Because my response to the paintings was integral. It said that they had accomplished the miracle, those Lakesiders of long ago, integrating man — the primeval hunter and the rational social being — with the totality of his environment. They had been free, whole, and unafraid, had loved life fully, and had been moved to express that love and life in a meaningful pattern in their temple to life ... a subtle form of worship that would be debased, after the rebellion, to mere groveling before a voracious fertility god ...

What was there to rebel against?

The colony was small. Maybe losing their reactor early had prompted them to keep their population low even after their removal to the lake. Meantime, they would retain the theoretical knowledge and much of the practice of science — physics, higher math, medicine — and more important still, the millennia-long tradition of human striving that had culminated in their ancestors' drive to start afresh on a virgin world.

At Lakeside, the vision of those ancestors approached fulfillment.

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At the period of the temple they reached their zenith.

But with success came expansion, and their first — perhaps only — miscalculation. More children were born than could be thoroughly instructed in the tradition and wisdom of their society — as Clellan had guessed, expansion outstripping the rate of instruction. Perhaps in a century, perhaps in two, everything they had struggled to perserve beyond life itself would fade into the twilight realm of the half-understood. At first only for a small minority, an out-group of nonparticipants that grew slowly, beginning to ask questions and not understand the answers, becoming suspicious, growing faster, ready to fight for the right to breed as they pleased, exploding into a majority in a frighteningly short time.

To a semiliterate people whose sinews were harnessed to an iron-age agricultural life, the scientific tradition seemed the esoteric preoccupation of the select few. More work at intrinsically unrewarding tasks was needed to serve the growing population — in the mines, for instance. Class distinctions would emerge, new social tensions. Add the effect of a philosophy no longer understood, a morality that therefore seemed too fragile to bind them. The liberty implied by the temple might become license for a while. But license is subjectively intolerable. The human animal senses within himself the urge to satisfy his whims or kill, and knows that in any social context it threatens himself. He feels the mindless concentration of his sexual impulse, is frightened by its power, and recoils. When the mind is highly conscious, a balance may be struck. When it isn't, a code emerges that is more reaction than balance, and neuroses become codified in custom and finally in law.

But there was still the new minority. A leadership refused a following must abdicate or impose itself by force. They probably laughed bitterly at the age-old paradox of dictatorship instituted to sustain the idea of freedom. But they tried it. In time frustration probably reduced them to a ruling clique that went about its task with blind compulsiveness and hidden fury, like their unwilling subjects. It created the final social tension. By the time of the uprising there had grown a hatred not only for the ruling class and everything it stood for, but also everything that stood for it — a hatred that lumped together artifact and insight, the light and the dark, the understanding and the final error.

We would probably never know just where the lines had been drawn. Had the miners sided with

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the leadership? More likely, I thought, they joined the rebels, smashed the mines and buried their tools to symbolize their dubious new freedom. Most importantly, in reaction against autocracy, the revolt created a new democracy, reversing in a final irony the paradox of the old leadership because it was expressly charged with securing the reaction to liberty. And thus was born a new dictatorship all the more vicious for being a projection of the popular will.

The dark recesses of the mind could now, in the bleak aftermath, make themselves felt fully. The revolt had justified their worst fears of their capacity for violence and produced new cause for guilt. Fear needed a rationale, the props of myth and symbol. The new regime could only live up to its premises by conducting a frontal assault on every sign and symbol of the preceding order. The several villages were gathered into one, self-ghettoized for closer control. The mines stayed shut. Soon they were anathematized as part of the old order. Learning died with the last of the learned, and writing too. The sun shone down on no more lithe active bodies, and twilight came to Lakeside.

The flight from freedom was complete. It remained only for time to kill the last direct memory so that mythologizing could metamorphose the former leaders into an evil priesthood who had served a god who was only now created, in the final necessary act of projection, and who embodied the hidden lust and savagery of the myth makers themselves.

"... response to a successful work of art," the medic was saying, "is largely emotional. But when the artist is more than facile, and the observer sensitive and intelligent, it can be translated into conscious thought, if not with scientific accuracy, then at least with relevance."

"All right," Greiner said patiently.

"On the other hand, the observer may read more into a work than is actually there. This tendency we rely on in thematic appercetion testing, where ..."

"Thank you," Greiner said. "That's the part I was waiting for."

"It's not that simple, chief," I said. "My interpretation is part of a whole, which includes verifiable overpopulation, a verifiable rebellion, and the present psychic state of Lakeside. The energy that's elsewhere channeled into art, ritual, social organization, here goes mostly into repression — mostly individual and psychic, but partly social, in spying and maintaining the patrols, and so on. They're so well policed they have no

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word for rape. They seek order through stasis. Every act, communal or private, is governed by its Propriety. There's a right way to do everything, and any other way is sinful. It's punished at the pillory. So they never have any technical or social innovations to adjust to. Sexual transgressions are considered acts of devotion to the old god, subversive worship — witchcraft in the historical sense, if not the popular one. The punishment is death and ignominious burial. The sex taboo incorporates a memory of overpopulation and limits each family to two children except when death or childlessness require compensation. Hence a static population, which is easier to control, but that's incidental. They've taken fear of aggression to the point where a breach of politeness is a punishable crime and fear of sex to the edge of racial suicide.

"Their mistrust of the spring season originates in memories of equinoctial rites, real or imagined, with a boost from the season itself. The idea that the witches are immortal presumably started with the accidental recovery of one of their bodies from a peat bog. The witches aren't a cult, because they're discontinuous. Each one has to make up his own ritual. But there's some continuity carried, ironically, in the prohibitions, like their association with tabooed metal. There's ..."

"A taboo on metal strikes me as preposterous," Greiner objected.

"Why?" the medic grinned suddenly. "Can't you imagine the eager young radicals insisting they were more revolutionary because they even threw away their knives and belt buckles? Pressuring everyone to go and do likewise?"

I picked it up. "So, soon they've got a flint blade industry. In a generation or two the taboo is in force, and anyone who breaks it is guilty of counterrevolution, which is in the process of becoming witchcraft. And then, in eight hundred years, we arrive.

"They couldn't reveal their laws and history without revealing their treachery to their old god. Because we identified ourselves with their ancestors, used metals, had a bewildering technology, they suspected us of attachment to the same or a similar god. In the one case, then we might avenge the rebellion. In the order, we were carriers of disorder. Measure their view of that disorder by Danela's fatalistic acceptance of Andersen's death; more clearly, of Hill's."

"A disturbed personality," Greiner snapped.

"Aren't they all? But as long as we were peaceful and patient, they were ready to give us the benefit of the doubt. Then we started the new

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cut in the lake bed.

"That worried them. If we found the body of a witch, the lid would be off — or so they thought. We did. Then came the business with Danela. We acted courteously and showed concern for the girl's welfare, but to them it was all inconsistent, suspicious. Then that evening I asked about their religion and threw Foris into shock by asking why they had a curfew. I think that decided them which side we were on. I don't know what they've been doing about it."

"Was this morning indicative?"

"The elders say that they were acting in accordance with their own laws, which we had promised to respect. They weren't interested in us. But they'd been suspicious of the girl for years. Now she'd run off and spent the night with the Old Ones, who had to be responsible for one of their number not returning to the village yesterday."

"Not to mention her unconventional way of greeting the sunrise," the medic said.

"The elders," Greiner said. "Or what's left of them ... which will be gone into at the proper time. Presumably, doctor, you continue to find this thesis reasonable?"

"Well I admit to some curiosity about the scattered settlements your other men have been investigating. Beck doesn't account for them. But then he says he hasn't heard all the History, which could contain a clue. I imagine they'll be explained eventually as the result of schismatic activity developing after the rebellion, though certain population elements may have been expelled as part of the rebellion or immediately after it."

"Otherwise you endorse it?"

"I endorse nothing. I'm only here because you asked me for my informal medical opinion on possible technical matters."

Greiner smiled indulgently. "Off the cuff, though?"

"Oh, it's unassailable — as a theory requiring verification."

"We'll let it go at that, then."

The medic stood up. I did too. Greiner smiled at me. "When you complete your report, I'll submit it to the proper people on the starship with my provisional okay."

I thanked him. He said nothing at all. The medic opened the door and stepped outside, waiting for me.

"A minute, Beck," Greiner said.

"Sure," I nodded to the medic, who closed the door. Greiner frowned faintly. I didn't think he was still puzzling about Lakeside. Then he looked up from behind the desk and pursed his lips, eyes unblinking and friendly as two wet brown pebbles.

"Were you really in any danger

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this morning?"

"The elders say no. I believe them."

"But you killed three men. This Elder Foris, another elder, the constable ... a bit drastic for a man who was in no danger."

"I didn't know I was in no danger. And I was responsible for Danela. The fact that she was being dealt with according to local law didn't change that."

"Your sense of responsibility was misplaced and possibly criminal. And that all-night jaunt was a flagrant breach of the rule against interfering with the mores of the community under study."

"Sure. What would you have done?"

"Followed procedure, of course. Returned the girl to the village last night before events got out of hand."

"She was a convert. She couldn't have hidden it. She'd have been dead and buried in the marsh at the end of the lake before sunrise."

"But it would have improved our record." He folded his hands across his middle. "You sure you didn't screw that girl, Beck?"

"I wish I had. We'd've had a nice friendly time, and I'd have got the answers anyway. We would have been in camp long after the deadline, and no Military showing up would have warned me about the check-off mistake. I'd have called in and got a campful of men here, and this morning would never have happened. Instead, I followed the rules and played hands off and got her killed."

"For which, I presume, you hold me responsible." A flicker of malice. Then, with weary patience: "You have to understand, Beck, that I have the good of the service to think about. Once this gets out ..."

"Let's stop sparring."

"I'm not sparring."

"You're afraid of what's going to come out in the Committee of Inquiry, and you're trying to line me up as scapegoat. It won't work. You pulled my crew out. If the camp hadn't been virtually deserted, there wouldn't have been one death, much less seven."

"A matter of opinion."

"Let's trade."

His eyes glinted. "That's beneath contempt."

"Is it?" I approached the desk. He slumped comfortably behind it. "It's not hard to prove anyone fallible, chief. You don't have to prove it of me. But if you smear me, I'll go after you with everything I've got. You pulled my crew out even though Loman had already reported no significant regression before removal from this site. Your plan to track down the history of

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human occupation on this planet will emerge as the boondoggle it really was, a plan for your own aggrandizement, the Great Man personally directing field activities, months of work with plenty of dramatic PR potential ..."

"That's enough," he said quietly. "I gave some thought to the later exploitation of elements of our work for public relations purposes because that's part of my job. I reassigned the men you keep referring to as *your* crew because available evidence indicated they could be put to better use here. The facts, Beck, the few facts you've mentioned will emerge in the course of the inquiry. The rest is slander."

"You reassigned the men at the first available excuse, on the shortest possible notice, as though you were afraid some digger might find something that would put your plan in jeopardy — and within a day and a half I'd found the solution, at Lakeside. All this may come out anyway, we don't know. But if you try to use me, I'll see that it does. You might, you just might manage to break me, but you'd be scattered in too many pieces to be worth picking up. They might even offer me your job."

He pushed a piece of paper around on his desk with a thick workmanlike forefinger. At least he no longer pretended my solution to Lakeside left him unconvinced.

He said softly, "I could have you fired for trying to blackmail me."

"Try it."

"You'd tear Anthro apart to save your own dirty neck, wouldn't you?" He looked at his hands. "All right. We'll trade."

"What'll we trade?"

"Damn it," he said in sudden fury, "I'll protect your interests and you'll protect mine."

"I don't need protection. The trade is this: no scapegoats. Not you, not me, not anyone."

There was a long pause after that. His face remained tautly angry. I sensed wheels turning swiftly in his head, problems and solutions clicking over with mechanical determination ... And then quite suddenly something happened to his face.

His offer had been a naked confession not just to me but to himself. By rejecting it I had undercut him even further. I watched him age. After a long while he sighed. A quiet flat sound, with the finality of emptiness. He sat slackly. Then he looked up at me.

It was the look you might get from a wild animal that has been given a mortal wound and knows it but doesn't know why. It was stunned bewilderment and a dawning, bright, personal hatred that was totally pathetic.

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His voice was a husk. "All right, Beck. Maybe you can have my job."

"I don't want it."

"Sometimes I think it's a lousy job."

"Maybe it is."

Behind him, through the window, I could see part of Loman's crew quitting for the day. I wondered aimlessly if Greiner would insist on keeping them here until my report was accepted higher up.

"I wish I knew why you won't take that truth shot ..."

I didn't answer.

"Damn you, Beck."

I went out the door and closed it.

I had gone in there tired and mean and ready for a fight. I had come out feeling dirty. I had hoped for a stalemate. Instead I had ... what? Killed a man? Not literally. But Greiner had never, until I tricked or forced him into making his offer, even suspected that he was not a big man executing big plans for a big purpose. He had been a great field man, but the years of the big smile and the big voice, politicking and PR and the big facade, had proved too much. He had reached his breaking point just like the rest of us.

Clellan has promised to buy me a drink at the commissary. I could use one. I started off to find him at the lab he had been assigned to.

When I got there the door was closed. I was vaguely troubled by its appearance, perhaps by the way my shadow fell upon it. I reached for the button anyway, felt a tingle of suspicion as I pressed it. The door opened. I saw what was behind it and really saw the door itself for the first time simultaneously. A man in a white coat was shutting up shop behind the counter. On the door at eye level clear white letters spelled out a word my eyes had refused to read: DISPENSARY.

My heart pounded a warning.

To get here, I had to take a left turn from Greiner's office instead of a right, and nobody does that kind of thing without a reason.

The man behind the counter took off his white coat.

"Hi. Come to see Reed?"

It looked like a safe bet. I nodded.

"Go on in. He's the only patient."

"How is he?"

"Got a headache. Won't take sedation because he says he already lost one night that way and wants to think." He pointed to the door into the infirmary, and I went past the end of the counter and through it and closed it behind me.

Reed was propped up on a cot by an unshaded window, smoking but not enjoying it. He had a writing tablet on his lap and a

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portable recorder occupied a stand beside him. He stared at me as if my face held as much meaning as a clock without hands.

He didn't look sick. He looked alert and as dangerous as a naked blade. I didn't like him any more than I had yesterday. So why had I come here? — And why hide from myself the fact that I *was* coming here? I'd been on my way to join a friend.

I had come here instead because Reed was *not* a friend.

I had come here precisely *because* Reed was dangerous.

But he couldn't do anything unless I first put the weapon into his hand.

So I had come to do just that.

He said abruptly, "First they said I owed you my life. Then they said the raiding party was only interested in the witch girl; so I don't owe you anything. Which is it?"

"You don't owe me anything."

"Good." He stubbed out the cigarette. "I've been digging into the literature, thought I might have found a parallel between Lakeside and the Nerthus worship of ancient Gaul. Nerthus was a fertility goddess, and there was a metal taboo invoked on certain feast days, but that's as far as it goes." He tossed the writing pad onto the night stand. "I'm in here for what the medics politely call observation. Theoretically I'll be reliable again after rehabilitation leave, which they're recommending."

"For me, too."

"I don't feel unreliable. Just mean as hell. Which may be a way of combating a sense of guilt. Or maybe Lakeside has made me too conscious of mental mechanics. This just a social call?"

"No... I came to tell you I wasn't protecting anyone this morning."

He had been rattling along almost as though talking to himself. Now we made contact.

He was completely immobile for a long moment.

"So *that's* why you won't take the truth shot ..." He smiled now, his eyes jewel-bright and hard. "You went over the rim and killed three men." He swung his feet off the cot and stood up. "You knew they were only interested in the ritual killing of a witch. You knew the girl was dead before you ever got that gun out. You set yourself up as judge, jury and executioner, conducted a trial, entered a verdict and carried out sentence all in a couple of seconds."

"That's about it."

"Good, wonderful ..." A short tight laugh. "What a comedown for the great All-Father Beck, you arrogant son of a bitch ... Of course, in fairness, I must say you could possibly be wrong."

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"No."

"Good, wonderful ... Come on: details."

"It happened the way I told it. When the first villager came from behind the shack, I didn't even react. I was too wrapped up in Danela. I've explained that. For a minute there in the sun she was free and alive in a way you and I and Greiner can never hope to be. I know that the way I know the sky is blue when I look up and see a blue sky.

"So the farthest thing from my mind was any sense of danger. It took a few seconds to recover it. I'd never thought of a pitchfork as a throwing weapon, but that's how he used it. The girl fell down, and the thing tore itself loose, and the villager ran down to retrieve it. The others were converging, about a dozen altogether. The first three were the constable and Foris and another elder. They went methodically about their business, and when I got my reflexes unclogged and remembered I was wearing a gun, I just as methodically blew them apart.

"The point is that it was obvious to me that I was in no danger. The second elder had even run up from behind me and ignored me. I was a theological danger, but they knew they'd never get away with killing me. They didn't try. It was also obvious that the girl was beyond any help you or I could give her. So I wasn't protecting anyone. Then I did my best to get the rest of the party. But they were scattering. I've no particular skill with a gun and didn't hit anyone. I kept trying though, till the magazine was empty.

"I thought, too bad, I'll get those guys later. Then I heard the sound of the beetles flying in from Sub-Base One and knew I'd been over the rim. I'd killed three men, deliberately, in a spirit of revenge. That's when I looked down the hill and saw you standing by the lab door and began to think again.

"First about Greiner. I'd talked to him a few minutes earlier. I was sure he'd try to use me as a scapegoat when the whole thing came before a Committee of Inquiry. The Military would also be in there pressuring again, and all the special interests that've been at us in the past. A scapegoat would come in handy. He'd have it easy, now. He could say that my solving the Lakeside puzzle was sheer accident, which maybe it was, and that every difference I'd ever had with him had indicated the instability I'd conclusively proved this morning. The most he would get would be an official suggestion that leaving the four of us at Camp Two hadn't been wise in view of his doubts about me. But I was

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damned if I'd take a fall for Greiner. So I'd fight back, impugn his competence. The committee would become a battleground for an imcompetent senior officer and an underling who'd gone berserk with a gun. The vultures would have a feast. The service would get eight kinds of hell anyway, but it would be worse with a display of internal dissension. The way to prevent that was let Greiner walk all over me.

"I'm not that magnanimous."

Reed had not calmed down enough to sit still. He tore the package getting out a cigarette, lit it, made a face, threw the package onto the night stand. I filched one, made myself comfortable on the adjoining cot.

"But if you could bluff your way around the breakdown," Reed said, "everyone would think you'd acted on the reasonable assumption that we were in danger and that the girl might be saved. Then you could face Greiner on equal terms. I believed you. Hell, everyone did." He shook his head admiringly. "Now get to the point."

"Earlier, I thought I'd volunteer for the truth shot and clear up any possible doubts about yesterday. Now I couldn't ..."

"You'd expose yourself. Come on, Beck, the point: why you're telling me all this." He was smiling again. I felt a spurt of the old irritation. "What's the master plan this time? What's in it for you?"

"Maybe I thought I owed it to you."

"You can do better than that."

"I'd let you down. All these weeks I'd been listening to you yell for help and hadn't even heard you."

He became still. His face lost its look of triumph and became old and dangerous.

"Meaning?"

"Meaning all the goading I took from you was intended to get you shipped out. You knew how close you were getting to the rim."

"Ridiculous."

"Is it? If I shipped you out, you'd be away from what you felt was a dangerous situation. You'd be able to conceal knowledge of your weakness from yourself by claiming I was a cheap tyrant unable to face the competition of your superior abilities — that I had it in for you."

"What dangerous situation am I supposed to have recognized at Lakeside?"

"Maybe competition with me. Maybe your growing aggression toward the Lakesiders. You could feel yourself reaching the danger point. That scared you, but you were just as scared of admitting it — so you couldn't leave even when I gave you the choice. I would have to force you."

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He said slowly, "You'll go to any lengths to justify yourself, won't you?"

I laughed. I hadn't told him the joke so he couldn't share it, but he sensed there was something he had missed.

"Ever since I got here, Greiner's been fishing around to find out why I won't volunteer for a truth shot. He got far enough out of line that I think he put the top Base Camp medic on my side. Then he began explaining how the good of the service demanded I take a lot lying down, and I threw my bluff at him: if he went after me, I'd go after him. I'd expected a stalemate. Instead I broke him. The poor bastard never once doubted the validity of his motives. Now he does. And he's through."

"So?"

"It shook me. Ever since, a corner of my mind's been tallying up the mistakes *I* made. I could've shipped you out, but at the high cost to my ego of how you'd explain it. I could have let Greiner close Camp Two, but was too impatient to prove my hunches, which could've been proved later anyway. And I could have called Base yesterday as soon as I'd put you to sleep. I didn't for a variety of reasons all held together by concern for my professional neck. I could have broken the chain at several places and saved a few lives. All of which raises the big question."

He said after a moment, "Is Greiner ... *Beck's* fall guy?"

I waited. He pitched the cigarette onto the floor, scowling.

"Is that what you came to find out? What d'you want, for God's sake? Absolution?"

"I was on my way to see Clellan. I arrived here without realizing it, didn't even see 'dispensary' in letters this high on the door until after I'd opened it. I took very good care not to let me know where I was going. Once I knew where, I thought I'd better keep going and find out why."

He sat down on the edge of his cot and looked at his toes.

"I never would have cast you in the penitent's role, Johnny."

"Me neither."

"All that girl wanted was to get laid, but you followed the rules and solved your puzzle, and she got dead. Okay, you're guilty of following the rules. So you cut him up a little."

"And the elders."

"Superego stuff. The superego is the ingrown toenail of the mind. It has very simple inflexible values and operates unconsciously. In a way you've been trained as thoroughly as any Lakeside kid that it's wrong to kill. Even symbolically, like Greiner. So your superego sends you here to confess

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to an unsympathetic confessor who would be delighted to betray you."

"That's right."

He said savagely, "To make me your accomplice in multiple revenge murder."

"No. Just to betray me."

"You think I will?"

"I don't know."

"Yeah," he said meaninglessly, and stood up. I almost heard his joints creak. He didn't look dangerous any more. Just tired.

He took a bottle of pills from a drawer in the night stand and went over to the water fountain and swallowed one, then another.

"I've got this goddamn headache ..." He touched the back of his head and winced. He went to the doorway and opened it and asked when you got dinner in this dump anyway and got an answer I didn't hear. He reclosed the door. "One thing about a Sub-Base Camp, you get a full-time infirmary attendant. Or maybe he has a gun under his coat. God. You realize we'll have to recommend some kind of education program for Lakeside? Talk about the blind leading the blind."

I closed my eyes. They burned.

Lakeside, I thought, projected a god from its own unconscious, wove a shroud and called it morality. Atavistic dreamers could play with ideas of a one-time perfect freedom, but they were just kidding themselves. Socializing the ancestral predator had created an unconscious peacekeeper that played by its own rules, extracted penalties according to its own archaic table of retributive violence.

... I weighed Greiner in the balance with myself and found him wanting. But I was a civilized man, hedged in by my own society's version of the Proprieties, cramped by my own unconscious judge, watched by my own executioner ....

Reed sat down on the edge of his cot again.

"To be completely fair," he said, "according to the rules we were taught as kids, you have to tell Greiner and hope he'll play fair too. But he won't. He'll still fight to save his reputation. If you let him win, everyone else loses. If you let him use you, what have you done except take advantage of the biggest patsy of them all — yourself?" He fumbled around on the stand for the cigarettes and lit another. "If he hadn't pulled the men out. If Hill hadn't got to Danela, or vice versa. If you'd shipped me out. Maybe you're right there. Maybe I was yelling for help. Know what you can do? When you get that Earthside leave, go to a good psychiatric hack and have him burn the guilt out of you. But you won't because you're an

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arrogant son of a bitch, like I said. You want to do what's right or take the consequences. Just another damned absolute that assumes there's a table to consult. Two times two is four, the mathematical apportionment of blame and punishment or eradicate past mistakes. But it can't. They're for living with. It's easier for me. I don't have anything to hide, and confessing hands out shares of the guilt. Like you just handed me some of yours. Maybe all you've done is make me your accomplice after all."

"You know what you can do so you can feel pure again."

"Sure. Throw the game to Greiner and the goons. Then I'd really have something to feel guilty about." He held out the burning cigarette. "You know what I'm going to do? Have a good hack redesign me into someone who can't stand these things. Won't be hard, I can't really stand them anyway." He took a drag, inhaled deeply, expelled a long cloud of smoke. "... What're you going to do?"

"Fight it."

"With that judge up there between your ears sending you out with an eye in one hand and a tooth in the other trying to buy its dumb justification ... it'll be quite a fight."

"I can't help feeling that the people who painted that cliff face knew a way around this kind of trap."

"That was a quick sight-reading job, Beck, and you hardly know the notation. You could be wrong."

Of course. But there was one thing I had not been wrong about.

I remembered Danela and the sense of revelation.

"Yeah." I got to my feet, went to the door.

"Do me a favor, will you?" he said from the cot. "Tell that creep in there that if I don't get fed in six minutes I'll come out and tear his arm off and roast if over a Bunsen burner."

I relayed the message, went outside.

The sun had just gone down. A pale quiet sky touched the desert's far edge. The air was still, pleasantly dry. I took a deep breath, caught the faint dusty fragrance of the gray spined shrubs dotting the eroded hills that hugged the camp on three sides.

In a way, this was Lakeside's antithesis, peaceful as a sleep almost as deep as death. The low baked hills sent back no echo. The voices of the men sounded as in a great distant emptiness. I listened for that deeper pulse, trying to reawaken the sense of freedom I had known only vicariously and too briefly some twelve hours ago, an

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age ago, but couldn't do it.

I told myself I was too tired, too involved. I told myself it shouldn't make any difference, I didn't really know. Meantime, I was a prisoner, or felt like one, and freedom bought with an eye or a tooth, a career or a life, would be only an expensive self-indulgence if it extracted the later wider payments both Reed and I foresaw. Who was to judge? I was. And be responsible for my judgement. Knowing that responsibility meant no justification, no absolution, only uncertainty ... I could have said as much and meant it a year ago. Saying it was easy.

If it was any consolation, I could see the penitent's ultimate goal at Lakeside. It was no consolation at all. We hadn't solved the problem that had defeated them, we were only enlightened enough to verbalize it.

I found Clellan in the commissary.

"I thought you'd catch up with me here." He brandished the glass in his hand. "How'd you make out?"

"Well enough, I guess. Greiner's under control, and there's a medic who's recommending me for leave."

He was suddenly still. He never missed much. He gave me a long, hard clinical stare.

I waited for him to say something unpleasantly diagnostic. I think he could have. Instead he produced his devil's grin, though it took him a moment to get it cranked up to full power.

"Some guys are lucky. Now let's get you that drink."

EPITAPH ON RIGEL XII

Here lies the body of Zebulon Shore
Whose mutinous conduct we cannot defend.
He laughed off orders when told to explore
The Horse-Head Nebula's opposite end.

— Sherwood Springer

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A GLASS GALOSH

I had two aims in mind this month: one, the usual, was to find something to review (the tidal wave of upcoming s/f films is far from the theaters as yet); the other was some excuse to bring up Cocteau's *Beauty and the Beast.*

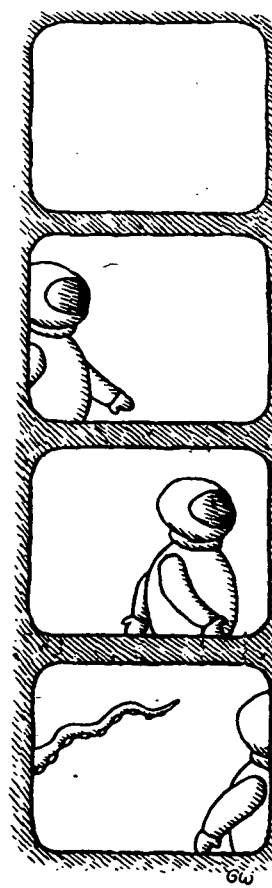
Both were solved with the advent of *The Slipper and the Rose: The Story of Cinderella.* The only problem is that I have almost nothing to say about it. It is prototypical of those film fantasies that producers think children are crying for.

It has sweet and/or cute '50s-musical comedy type songs. It has some innocuous dances. It's nicely produced with authentic period castles and unauthentic period costumes. It has one of those highly competent British casts, including Michael Hordern, Margaret Lockwood, Kenneth More, Christopher Gable, the late, great Edith Evans, and — er — Richard Chamberlain (well, he *looks* like a prince).

The Cinderella, a newcomer named Gemma Craven, is pretty and quite, quite vapid. This goes for the entire movie — it has all the magic of a pair of galoshes; I have seen Abbott and Costello movies that were fountains of coruscating enchantment in comparison.

BAIRD SEARLES

Films



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Why, with all the magic of cinema at their fingertips, do filmmakers avoid making magical films? (In this one, for instance, the fairy godmother is a kindly maiden aunt type who nods vaguely and a pumpkin becomes a coach.) Has there ever been a pure fantasy film (as opposed to s/f or supernatural) that *was* magic?

To the surprise of no one who read the first paragraph of this piece, the answer is yes, and the film is Cocteau's *Beauty and the Beast*, released in 1946. I was lucky enough to have seen it again recently, broadcast by my local PBS station.

It is interesting that when *Beauty and the Beast* first appeared, it was hailed as a masterpiece of the surrealist cinema. Then as now, the intelligentsia not attuned to fantasy had to have some handy label to justify their admiration, had to view it as anything but what it was, which was the purest of fantasies, a fairy tale, told with no gimmicks and not adapted in some chic manner to make it palatable.

How did Cocteau achieve the avoidance of the Disney treatment that almost every other filmed fantasy has been subjected to? Well, he told the story absolutely straight, with on one hand no cuteness whatsoever (some humor, but no cuteness) while on the other he left in the darker elements which every fairy tale has. The Beast's entrance is anticipated by the father's discovery of a slaughtered deer, and later, the Beast, after some dreadful kill, stands before Beauty's door staring at the blood on his paws, which steams and smokes.

The Beast's castle is hardly a comforting place. The statuary and the faces carved into the mantelpiece watch the proceedings with living eyes. No, there is little prettiness here.

(Come to think of it, *Cinderella* is atypical in having no dark elements — merely an unpleasant woman with two unpleasant daughters. Perhaps that is why it has been filmed so often, with such dreary results.)

And while Cocteau has left the basic story alone, he has decorated it with a wealth of fantastic detail. In addition to the faces-that-watch mentioned above, there are the living arms that emerge from the wall, bearing candelabra that burst spontaneously into flame.

And long before slow motion (I cannot bring myself to use the current expression "slo-mo") became a fashionable cliche in cinema (and an inept visual metaphor for speed with those boring bionic people), there was the astonishing (and magical) vision of Beauty floating down the entrance hall of the castle, her robes drifting about her, in a dreamlike reality of panic as

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the bare and living arms of flesh extend their lights.

I could go on at some length, but those who have seen it need no reminder of the magic; those who haven't should have some things left to discover. It is a film of the purest fantasy, from George Auric's enchanted music to the sexual bestiality of the makeup for Jean Marais' beast. I hope that your local PBS station will be showing it soon.

Worst - idea - of - the - year - dept . . . Just recently I saw *Rosemary's Baby* again on the TVs, and was impressed anew at its intelligence, economy, and subtlety. The most terrifying thing about the film, though, is that all of this skill leads to an ending which is an epic of implication; that the Year 1 of the anti-Christ will lead to unimaginable chaos. So it was the dumbest of ideas to do a TV followup (*sans* all the original cast except the unsinkable Ruth Gordon) called *Look What's Become of Rosemary's Baby* (or some such — it was *not* one of those titles that sticks in the mind). Not totally devoid of interest (acting on the premise of a dual nature for the anti-Christ), it still cheapened the impact of the original, as inevitably happens when a shoddy film is made to follow a good one, to cash in (literally) on its success.

Masticated - words - dept . . . A few months back while reviewing *Logan's Run*, I passed over fleetingly the novel from which it was drawn. (It had been ten years since I read it and I decided to play it safe.) William F. Nolan, co-author of the novel with George Clayton Johnson and one of the more vocal of the writing community, reminded me with good humor but in no uncertain terms that I had given the novel a rave review back when it appeared and sent me a copy of my review to prove it. That brought back enough for me to reaffirm that *Logan's Run* is a stylish and fast moving piece of fiction that's well worth reading whether you liked the film or not.

SOLUTION TO FEBRUARY ACROSTIC PUZZLE: Damon Knight-"Special Delivery" (Galaxy Science Fiction, 1953).

The doctor slapped him smartly on the minuscule buttocks. The wizened, malevolent face writhed open; but it was only the angry squall of an ordinary infant that came out. Leo was gone.....

Moira raised her head weakly. "Give him one for me," she said.

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This creepy rural fantasy comes from a new writer who tells us that she was born and raised in Nebraska, taught at a country school there and now lives in Denver with her husband and three sons. Ms. Stearns has been writing for eight years, and her work has appeared in The Denver Post, Fantasy and Terror and several literary magazines.

An Altogether Peculiar Summer

by STEPHANIE STEARNS

It was born late one hot afternoon and Junie died of hysterics. Doc jumped back from the bed with a yell and put his thumb in his mouth like I do when I've hit mine with a hammer or cut it on something. He snatched up his bag with a wild look in his eye and hollered something about me not ever calling again. I don't remember him driving away, except there's kind of an echo in the back of my mind of his old flivver snorting down the lane like there was a madman at the wheel. I was holding Junie's hand, trying to make sense of the whole thing, and Doc's leaving wasn't too important right then, but it wouldn't surprise me none to find out Doc was crazy. I'm not too sure I'm not.

Junie's hand grew cold in mine while I sat there. I couldn't think or feel. I just sat there holding her hand, kind of in a fog. There was kind of a mewling-buzzing sound in the room, and maybe that's what brought me out of my daze for a minute. Anyway, I saw it squirming on the foot of the bed and I got up to look at it.

The first thing I thought of was the cow dying last spring. I never did figure out why. She came in with the herd for evening milking and keeled over at the water tank. She hadn't shown any sign of disease when Junie turned the cows out to pasture that morning, and none of the others seemed to be affected by whatever killed her. There wasn't a mark of accident or predator on her, either, and she wasn't more than four years old, and so it couldn't have been old age. I couldn't afford to have the vet out to tell me why she died so mysterious like. So I just wrote it off as a loss and let it go at that.

The trouble was the cow died right at the busiest time of the year.

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I was still out in the fields plowing, trying to make up time lost to the rains. We'd had a late, wet spring, and I had to work the fields from dawn till dark to get caught up, and Junie had to do all the chores around the place. She told me about the cow while I was eating supper by lantern, but it was too dark to do anything about her then. Next morning I forgot because I had to get back to the fields, and it was dark when I came in again the next night. This went on for the better part of two weeks, and the dead cow just lay there by the water tank, and the rest of the animals detoured around her when they came and went from the pasture.

I can't remember a year as peculiar as this one. Right after the last spring rain, it turned hot as midsummer, and the humidity from the drying fields was almost unbearable. I roasted, sitting on the tractor plowing up and down the rows, and it wasn't any better for Junie milking, feeding chickens and pigs, gardening and gathering eggs, as well as doing her housework. We hardly ever spoke, we were both so tired all the time, and when we did, it had to be something important enough to waste breath and strength on. She mentioned the dead cow a couple of times, said it was flyblown and beginning to smell, but I couldn't spare the hour or two necessary to take the carcass off to the trench in the north pasture to bury it.

The trench was a deep gash in the end of a point of high ground, and when an animal died, all I had to do was drag it out there and cave off some of the cliff side of the gash to cover it, but it took time I couldn't spare from the fields right then if I was going to get the seed in the ground. Lord knows we needed a good crop bad, and I wanted the seed to have the benefit of the spring rains before the heat of summer dried out the ground.

The day I got the last row of corn sowed, I still had a few hours of light left, and so I drove the tractor down to the water tank figuring to take care of the dead cow. I don't know how Junie stood it all that time, bringing the cows in past the dead one. It near turned my stomach right then. It was one big quivering mass of maggots, squirming and wriggling around each other like they was mad as hell about something. I couldn't see one hair of that cow's hide, and if it hadn't been for the hooves, I wouldn't have known where to grab hold with a rope to drag it off.

The rope wasn't no use, though, because after I had it tied and started up the tractor, the legs just pulled off the body. I had to go back up to the barn and put the scoop on the front of the tractor and cart the thing off in it. It took a

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lot longer than it would have the day she died, but I finally got her under a layer of dirt, and that was that.

We had a plague of flies the first week of June, and I knew it was because I hadn't got all of the maggots from around the dead cow. They was bigger than a normal farm fly, too, some of them about the size of a half-dollar, and meaner than hell. They didn't bother me too much, but Junie got bit several times and took to wearing my old long-sleeved shirts and a bee net over her head 'stead of her regular hot-weather shorts and halter. We swatted and sprayed and didn't seem to be making any headway against the critters whatsoever, and then all of a sudden they was gone.

We had breathing spell then when we could admire all the new calves and count the litters of piglets as well as the money we'd make on them, come market time. The corn came up strong and green, the best crop we'd ever had and it looked like we was going to have a good year. We was pretty well satisfied with our prospects and congratulated each other on how things was going, but it didn't last long.

Junie got real sick and we couldn't figure out what was wrong. She started having nightmares about the flies and woke up screaming that they had faces and were going to kill us all. Ain't never anybody been killed by a fly around here that I ever heard of, and I told her so, but every night she'd have the same nightmare about it. I took her in to see Doc and he examined her real good but he looked puzzled. He asked about several little round scars she had across her stomach, and she told him about the big flies we'd had and that the scars was where they bit her before she started wearing one of my old shirts. He looked kind of skeptical, but he couldn't see any other reason for the scars. He said Junie was pregnant and that was probably why she wasn't feeling too good and the nightmares were a result of her condition combined with an overactive imagination stimulated by the fly plague, which he didn't doubt, although he thought we exaggerated their size. He gave her some pills to calm her nerves so she could sleep and told her to take it easy and we could expect the baby about Christmas time.

I've lived on a farm all my life, and I've seen every kind of farm animal through every stage of pregnancy and birth, and while I ain't never seen a woman give birth, I reckon I know as much about pregnancy as the next man, and Junie's sickness wasn't nothing like anything I ever seen before.

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In the first place, the nightmares never stopped. Every night she went to sleep exhausted, and it wasn't more'n an hour before she'd be screaming in her sleep. The screaming work us both up, and we never seemed to get any rest after that in spite of doubling up on the pills Doc gave her.

Besides that, she blew up in less than a month to the full nine-month's size, and it didn't take no brains at all to see she'd either bust or give birth long before Doc's Christmas estimate. By the end of June her stomach looked like she'd swallowed a cantaloupe whole. Instead of a gentle swelling that blended with her natural roundness, it was just like a firm knob sticking out from her body. In another week the knob broke or went soft and looked more like a big football, but it squirmed all the time. It wasn't never still and quiet, but Junie said it didn't feel nothing like a baby kicking was supposed to feel.

What with the nightmares not letting her sleep and the strange way her body looked and felt, Junie began to look like one of them specters I've read about in ghost stories. She got skinny as a starved dog, and her eyes were deep-sunk and haunted, like she looked at something horrible all the time. Her pretty hair was tangled, and her soft skin that always got golden tan in the summer turned dry and gray. She looked more like a thousand-year-old mummy than a girl not even old enough to vote yet. She kept saying it was eating her alive, and I didn't dare leave her long enough to cultivate the corn, and we soon couldn't see it for the weeds. Even when I slopped the pigs and milked the cows, I made her sit on the porch where I could see her in case she needed me fast.

It wasn't even a month since we were in to see Doc when she started her labor. I never seen any critter suffer like she did, not even the mare that died when her colt tried to get itself born the wrong way. I didn't want to leave her, but I knew I couldn't handle this alone, and so I rode old Baldy into town after Doc. I didn't even take time to put a saddle on him, and I just turned him loose in town and rode back with Doc in his car. Riding with Doc was faster and I knew Baldy'd find his way home by himself.

We got here just in time for June to give birth right into Doc's hands. I was looking for some clean towels and I heard Doc say, "Lay down, Junie, don't look," and then Junie was screaming so hard I thought it would tear her throat out. I ran over to see if I could help, and she died right there in my arms. That's when Doc yelled and tore out of the house and left me alone with it.

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I looked at it and knew it was born right out Junie's nightmares. It was kind of human and kind of not. It had two pairs of legs kicking in the air, but only one pair of arms. That's all I noticed at first. I guess I was still in shock over Junie's dying, or maybe two pairs of legs give me another shock. It started buzzing again, and I remember thinking that ain't the way babies are supposed to cry, and I looked at its head. All I could see was big round eyes, one on each side of its head, and they looked like they had hundreds of flat surfaces joined together instead of one smooth round surface like people's eyes have. I thought of my old granny telling stories of how babies are sometimes marked if their mothers see something terrible while they're pregnant, and I knew those unnaturally big flies had marked this one.

Then it turned over. It stood up on its hands and one pair of legs, and the other pair of legs started scratching at its back. That's when I saw the wings. They came out of its shoulders and were thin enough to see through. I realized it wasn't scratching so much as trying to unstick the wings from its back and dry them out. They waved a couple times like it was just testing them, and then it came flying right at me, and I knew Junie's nightmares were coming true. I jumped back, and it flew around the room a time or two, then headed for the window as if drawn by the light. It bumped into the glass and buzzed real mad like then backed up and tried again. It hit the glass several times, and I began to get scared the glass would break and the screen wouldn't hold it, either. I edged real careful over to the door and opened it as quiet as I could, then jumped out and shut it hard behind me. I heard a thump on the other side of the door and knew it had just barely missed getting out with me.

I ran down to the barn and found an old chicken cage we kept settin' hens in when we wanted to break them of the notion of settin'. It was just right for my purpose, provided the thing didn't grow any before I got back to it. It took me a little longer to find the fishing net with the long handle and make sure it didn't have any holes in it. It was pretty dusty but seemed strong enough. When I got back to the house, I could see it trying to get out the window again; but when I stepped up on the porch, I heard a thump on the door and I knew it was smarter than I'd thought.

I tried to remember whether the door between the pantry and kitchen was open, but I couldn't. Either way, the pantry window was the only other way into the house, and I had to chance it. Lucky for me, the door was closed because

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while I was getting the cage and net and myself through the window, I heard it thumping on the pantry door, and I knew I'd never have made it with the door open. I shut the window behind me just in case and leaned against a shelf to catch my breath a minute.

The thumping stopped, and then I heard it buzzing at the kitchen window, and I figured it had forgot about me. I held the net ready and eased the pantry door open far enough to get through, then closed it quick behind me. I didn't see it for a minute, and then it swooped across the room right toward my face. It couldn't have known what a net was, but when I held it up it veered off, and I knew I'd have to chase it like I used to chase butterflies when I was a kid. We went round and round the kitchen, with me blundering into chairs and the table and knocking things off the shelves, and I began to think I'd give out before it did. Maybe its wings weren't strong enough for the size of its body, or maybe it thought I was just too slow to worry about, but it stopped to rest on the ceiling, and I swung the net with my last ounce of strength.

The force of my swing swept it head-first right down into the narrow end of the net so its legs and wings were all pinned tight to its body. I almost didn't need the chicken cage, but I decided I better not trust the net to hold long because it was already beginning to struggle. I saw my face reflected a hundred times in the funny flat surfaces of its eyes, and I knew it was not only dangerous, but evil as well. The buzzing noise it made sounded like a thousand killer bees, and I don't remember ever being that scared before.

I carried it out, still wrapped in the net inside the cage, and set it down in front of the back tractor wheel. I was going to run over it and squash it, but at the last minute I couldn't. I saw Junie's face and I just couldn't.

I took it down to the trench in the north pasture where I buried the cow, and I shoved the sides of the trench in over it and packed the whole thing down with the tractor. I must have spent a couple hours driving the tractor back and forth over it, making sure I had it tamped down good and solid.

I buried Junie in the family cemetery out beyond the grove of trees that makes a windbreak for the barn and hoglot. I read the words myself.

Ever since then, I been sitting on the porch waiting and watching. I hold the shotgun across my knees, or leave it leaning against the wall when I'm eating, but it's always in reach. I don't think it can get out of that grave under the tractor, but I'm not sure.

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Dennis Etchison ("Drop City" August 1974) returns with an evocative story about a young couple and their reaction to an amusement park freak show.

On The Pike

by DENNIS ETCHISON

His name was Geoff and he had been seeing her for seven weeks, ever since; almost exactly, in fact. Her name was Sherron. She was nineteen - and - a - half and a Fine Arts major, and he had met her at the semiannual Student Arts & Crafts Sale in the sculpture patio among the kilns and unfinished steel and bronze weldings, the finished ones as well all jagged, angular jumbles resembling knives, halberds and rusty sheets in the sun and concrete shadows.

A crowd of women in floral print dresses cooed over her bowls and ceramic teapots; her dishes were going like hotcakes. He had short-cut through the Arts wing on his way back to the House, and now circled in the unexpected activity, arriving at her table by natural course.

Tracing with his finger a caricatured Uncle Sam glazed blue-and-russet on a centerpiece plate she had tagged *not for sale,* he thickened his lower lip and nodded in a knowing wrap-up and turned to leave.

"Wait!" She waved through her customers, edging to the end of the table.

"You talking to me?"

"Um.. Do you have a match?"

She was pretty, cute, close enough to it, at least. He nodded and fished in his windbreaker.

"Thanks." She ignored the pottery hounds — they were picking over her last few pieces, anyway — and watched his eyes. "Do you have a cigaret?"

He watched back, came up with two.

She cradled her elbow in her other hand and flexed the cigaret in her fingers. He lit hers and then his, waiting ceremoniously for the sulfur to burn off first. She cupped her hands, small and gray with dried clay, around his and inhaled.

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"Do you have a car?" she asked, without blinking.

He had to laugh. "What's your —" Only then did he recognize her as the girl his roommate had pointed out in the cafeteria. That one'll help you forget, man, Greg had smirked. She'll go out with an-y-one. For one night. "Your name's Sherron, isn't it."

"Mm-hm. I have to get to the USC Dental Clinic by three o'clock. I have an appointment."

She stared him down.

He glanced at his watch. "Three o'clock, huh?"

"I thought afterwards we could go to my place. I could make you some Ovaltine, or something."

When he looked up she was smiling. Really smiling.

"You're not putting me on, are you." He said it like he already knew the answer.

"No," she said. And she wasn't, either.

So it had gone: from icepacking a wisdom tooth socket all the first night, to breakfast *and* lunch *and* dinner, to the friendly, slippery morning showers, till it was too damn much trouble driving back to the House for periodic supplies of books, money, underwear and socks. He had moved out, and moved in. One night they passed in and out of each other's eyes for hours, each leaning forward as if to enter a mirror held by the other, and out again, and then again. So they would get married — no shit. She acted as if she didn't care about that part at first, though she warmed to it after introducing him to her sisters in West Covina. Some nights he dreamed he had stuck his neck out an open skyscraper window, but made himself leave it there on the sill, daring the window to come crashing down and behead him. He had broken through to the other side, and he was going to stay there, no matter what.

So that now, after a basketball game at the Long Beach Sports Arena, they found themselves mousing their way back in a determinedly unhurried stumble-pace to the car. A few colored lights remained on along the Nu-Pike, an old boardwalk fronting the parking lot, and the bulbs reflected in the easy tide lapping the sandy bar, breaking up like winking Christmas lights in the gently strafed waters.

"'Hey," she said, "I wanna ride the roller coaster!"

"Naw," he said, tightening his arm on her neck, steering, "come on, they tore it down, remember?"

"No, then, well, so what?" insisted Sherron. "We can still have fun!"

"You want to get mugged? There's nothing over there but winos and sailors."

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"Come *on*. You can buy me a cotton candy, or something."

A country-and-western bar was letting out in the amusement park. The couples sashayed away, all sequin shirts and wide dresses, their dishwater children, he imagined, left under blue TV screens in paper-thin rooms somewhere; he couldn't hold back a bitter thought of Jeannie and the hick veteran she had run to the altar with — was it only seven weeks ago? Some kind of square. He had seen him once. Probably has tattoos, thought Geoff.

Sherron led him past boarded-up concession stands, a fortune-telling parlor with frayed tassel drapes and a palmistry chart the size of a hyperthyroid octopus. The pavement glistened with stains of indeterminate origin, shiny smears like the ones found on garden leaves and walkways the morning after a rain. A huge plastic model of a hot dog - on - a - stick thrust out from a stand in an obscene beckoning. In the dim glass, beyond her reflection, he saw dark and cooling game machines and wilted stuffed animals. He stood staring, trying hard to think of something, when she began pulling excitedly at his sleeve.

She pointed to a spot a hundred feet down the pike, where stragglers had drifted to form a crowd in front of a small wooden platform.

"It looks like a show! Oh, can we go?"

A man with a neck microphone was gesturing at the canvas behind him, and now Geoff heard his tired voice reverberating between the rows of empty rides and abandoned booths.

He caught up with her just as the pitchman introduced a girl in a turquoise harem costume. The pitchman promised a mystifying, stupefying and mesmerizing demonstration, "one which you will remember the longest day you live.

"But first," he pressed on, his moustache brushing the microphone like the sound of a riffled stack of bills, "allow me to call your attention to what I hold here in my left hand...."

He held up a blue roll. All day long, he said, he had been selling admissions at one dollar per. He made a rhetorical bet that some "within the sound of my voice now" had paid that full price time and again to see the very same show that was about to go on again inside the tent.

"But this is our last performance of the night and, tell you what, I'm going to put these away." He held up a pink roll. "That's right, *fifty cents*, the regular child's price — this time and this time only!" To a faceless man in the booth: "Herb, don't sell any more of these adult tickets tonight...."

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"I bet he says that every time," whispered Geoff.

"Shh!"

Then the barker called everyone — there were only twelve or fifteen — in close to the platform, so they would not miss the mind-boggling demonstration he had promised.

He tied her wrists to a splintered, cross-like T-square (to force truth from her before the trick was over?). Geoff watched her writhe in the soft ropes, her bejeweled navel rising and falling above a low gilt belt.

Now the latecomers, almost all men, pressed intently to the platform, their eyes rolling over her like ball bearings on a washboard.

"She's wearing a wig," Sherron interjected. "And there's a rip in her armpit. *Poor thing.*"

The barker pitched and persuaded and promised and enticed, and the audience, grown restless, flicked eyes from the word pictures flying like spittle-moths from his mouth to the painted poster renderings strung up against the tarp:

Pin Head, an androgynous mystery.

Mister Frozo.

Petrified Man.

The Human Pin Cushion.

A sword swallower with the neck of a giraffe.

A fire eater.

And a geek, curiously unexplained.

He started a portable phonograph, promising admittance for those in line before the music stopped — "Limited standing room!" — and then, don't blink, the girl whipped her freezing hands out of the ties, hiding them in her veil as she ducked inside.

They got in.

Geoff smelled sawdust and something he didn't want to name as they inched from the closed flap. His eyes strained to open to the dim light. Sherron hung on his sleeve, her breast pushing into his arm, and he liked that, and then remembered why: Jeannie, walking home from school in their sophomore year, before he had gotten his car. He hadn't known what it had meant, that memory, until now, and he fought it, everything about Jeannie, Geoff and Jeannie, Jeannie and Geoff. Well, the hell with her. He had something different now, and better, he told himself, and he wasn't going to give it up. It didn't, it didn't matter what his friends said, that he was 'on the rebound'...

He put his arm around his fiancée.

The sword swallower slid an assortment of smooth chromed blades into his gullet, starting each one carefully and then allowing the weighted handle to glide it down all the way. He wiped them before with a rag reeking of antiseptic, drawing them swiftly up and out and

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wrapping them neatly away at the end.

"That's easy," confided Sherron, "see, he just tips his head so far back his whole throat opens."

"Yeah, sure, but how does he keep from throwing up?"

"Aw," said Sherron, "I wanna see something good!"

The magic show was slow and tacky; it was the sword swallower again, doing double duty. He struggled through a levitation with the girl in the harem costume. He got her up on the board, then kicked out the chairs, *then* put the sheet over her — which he had forgotten; and every time she started to tip one way or the other he had to yell back at the shabby curtain for someone to tighten the wires.

It was the last show of the night, all right. Geoff felt embarrassed for the man, he couldn't help it. But Sherron laughed. She was getting restless, he could tell.

Pin Head was asleep, they were told.

Mister Frozo was down for the last time, too, laid out on a bed of nails surrounded by twenty - five - pound blocks of ice like the ones that come down the chutes of vending sheds in small towns. You didn't want to stand too close to the table, with the dirt and straw melting to mush underneath. Mister Frozo, a beefy pink man without expression, appeared at first, too, to be asleep, and perhaps he had been for hours; the outline of his body had sunk deep into the icy supports; when he got up, if he would when the show was over, he would leave behind a mantle of Goudi architecture, clear shivering crystals like the pointed slopes of translucent icebergs.

But just then Mister Frozo, prodded, did sit up, lifting slowly at the waist like a rigor mortised cadaver, so that all could see the deep hole-like indentations quilted into his back.

"Sit on him!" someone suggested, and a girl laughed.

Shuddering, Geoff stepped ahead to the next stall. The cold was beginning to get to him. He rubbed his hands, breathed into them.

Next in line was the Petrified Man.

Geoff stood reading the signboard while Jeannie, no, it was Sherron, moved over with him, and then the others led by the sword swallower. The sign was crudely lettered and spelled, as if by a child. This is what it said:

THE MAN 14,000 YRS. YOUNG! This perfect Specimen of a MUMMY unearthed in North Amer. Continent by Archeologists in the Place: Puebla, Mex. in the year: 1939 A.D. The Prehistoric Man was a member of the Clovis Culture (12,000-10,000 B.C.) and made his own Lanceolated Spear Points us-

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ing the Flint or Chip Method of design. He is therefore assumed to be a Hunter, several of his Tribesmen were found nearby & were also known to be Hunter's also. He made his home a rude Wickiup made of sticks or branches and the skins of Animals he Tracked & Killed. He is preserved so timelessly by the High Altitude & Dry Climate, so that he was preserved whereas his Tribesmen were not. Look carefully and you will see authenticated Hair, Fingernails. You have just witnessed the Most Perfect Specimen of Man of his Era on Earth!!

Truly An Unforgettable Sight

The sword swallower recited the same words out loud. And that was that, except that those who wanted a closer look were given time to file past Petrified Man in his plastic-capped pine box, a very realistic mock-up, brown and taut and convoluted as a chestnut. Uneasily Geoff noticed the teeth.

Sherron no longer clung to his arm. He turned and snared her wrist out of the stragglers shuffling to the far end of the tent.

"You don't want to see any more, do you?"

"Well, what do you think?"

"I think it's a stone drag," he answered soberly.

"Oh, come *on*," she said, "we never have any fun," and that brought him up short.

A drunk, a pair of sailors similar as bookends, a girl from the country-and-western bar, an overweight, rumpled, lonely man with perpetual five o'clock shadow, a young crewcut with his sleeves rolled, picking his nose slowly after a hard day and night at the pinballs, Geoff and his girl and three or four — who could be sure? — other furtive presences on the fringe. They found themselves clumped together before a last platform.

The sword swallower went into a low-key spiel about fire-eating.

Someone yawned loudly and left the tent.

Hearing that, the sword swallower gave up. He dropped to the edge of the platform and tried an informal huddle.

First he dipped a black-tipped wire — it was something like a charred marshmallow on a length of coat hanger — in fluid and ignited it with a whoosh.

He spat out a medicinal lozenge and showed the inside of his mouth. He lifted his tongue. "No," he answered candidly, "my mouth's not coated with anything. You don't *need* anything to do this," and Geoff believed him. In fact, this casual revelation was the first thing he had believed tonight.

Fixing his eyes on the ceiling, the sword swallower popped the fireball in and closed quickly to ex-

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tinguish it. "It's the fumes," he said. "The fumes are what's burning, not the wad. You cut off the air, that's it." He picked a second wire from the jar and lit it with his Zippo. Black smoke wisped upward.

"See, I can put my fingers right through it." He cupped his hand through the glowing aurora around the fireball. "See, it's the vapors burning," he said, flashing his smudged palm. "That's what you call the fumes."

"Don't you ever burn your mouth?" someone asked.

"You get numb to it. I been doing this for years." He plucked two more torches, holding them between his knuckles like xylophone sticks, and ignited them. "The trick is to hold your breath, or you suck fire."

"Yeah, but did you ever get burned?"

He twirled the first torch toward his lips in a graceful, surprisingly feminine gesture, dousing it quickly, and then the pair of torches together. He inserted them rapidly, aiming cleanly into the center of his open mouth. A second longer and the flames would lick his nose and chin, would sweep up the rod to his fingers.

"Sure, I been burned. Wouldn't you?"

He hunkered closer. He stretched back his thin lip with his thumb to reveal a beaded chain of small blisters lining the inner membrane. Someone drew in breath.

"I been burned more times than I can remember. *Every part that can burn has been.*"

Geoff took a close look at him. The face was one of those the age of which, once past puberty, is incomputable, rawboned and alert, every trace of self-indulgence long gone from it. The eyes were a startling eggshell blue, transparent as water, the nose pointed, nostrils pinched, the bridge pitted with blackheads as his cheeks were pitted with scars. The short, coarse hair shone from working in the sun, and the skin reflected a bright oil sheen. The expression on the sword swallower's face was a kind of detached mercilessness, toward itself as well as the world. It was a face seen at shooting gallery machines in Greyhound bus depots the country over, and it was a law unto itself.

"You all probably want to see this," he said.

He felt behind him, came up with a forty-five rpm record. Geoff tried to read the label. The sword swallower held it as if displaying a product, and a certain indefatigable pride showed through now in spite of the late hour.

He bit the record about an inch into the grooves, grimacing, his teeth dry and white and bone-like. The vinyl cracked and crumbled.

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He showed the disk, a rough half-moon missing from the edge. He began to chew. His eyes clenched, his jaws vibrated. The plastic broke and ground to powder. He chewed till nothing but black grounds remained in his mouth. He balled the powder into a clod and wiped it into a handkerchief.

A girl's voice tried to interrupt.

He held up a hand and went on cleaning his teeth and gums with his finger. Then, "Hey," he called behind the curtain. He waited, hand out. "You know what I want." The curtain wobbled. A deep, unseen voice grumbled. "Don't give me any of that," he snapped.

He dropped his eyes to the bottom of the curtain, reached over and picked up a light bulb.

He turned it in his fingertips. Then he cracked it on the stage like an egg, took a curved, opaque wafer and positioned it in his mouth. He began to chew in a rolling motion, grinding it to dust. He extended his tongue to show the pile of shining particles, then picked off the ground glass cautiously, daubing with the handkerchief.

"Why don't you swallow it?" asked a girl.

"Who said that?" he asked cooly, but the spectators were hidden in the shadows. "I can swallow it. You want to see me swallow it?"

"Don't it hurt your innards?" asked a man's voice. It was one of the sailors, in front, and he sounded genuinely interested.

"Sure it does. What do you think? Let me ask you something. Wouldn't it hurt you?"

No answer.

"What did you say?"

Finally, "Then —" The sailor did not finish.

"It's something I do," answered the sword swallower.

He took a bent pack of Kools from his pants pocket, straightened one with careful strokes. He lit it, inhaling deeply. Seconds passed. A board fell outside, and heavy shoes somewhere.

"Let's see you put that cigaret in your mouth," said a girl.

He looked into the darkness, his face hard as rock. Then he laid the cigaret on his tongue, the glowing tip protruding from his mouth, and simply flicked it inside like a chameleon. Smoke blew out his nose. Then he opened his mouth, flicking the cigaret back out and down.

"Satisfied?" he said to the darkness. He wasn't smiling.

"Let's see you put it out."

The sword swallower held a deep breath, let it out slowly and with great control. He cocked an eye knowingly. "Let's hear the rest of it," he said.

A giggle.

"No. Come on. You want to say something, say it."

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"Let's see you put that cigaret *out* in your mouth, I said."

No, thought Geoff. Don't let her make you.

The sword swallower sat forward, elbows braced on knees. He stared at the cigaret. His expression was unreadable. He took a hard drag and tapped the ash, rolling the cigaret in his fingers. He made a short, bitter sound that might have been a laugh, straightened his back, crossed his left ankle on his right thigh, dragged again, tapped the ash again so that the bare coal was hot and bright in the air.

"I can do it, you know. I've done it before. It'll blister for four days, then it'll hurt like hell. But I can do it. What's the matter, you think I can't?"

Geoff cleared his throat. "Man," he offered, "you don't have to prove anything." Uncertainly he added, "The hell with her, see?"

The sword swallower looked at Geoff, or as near as he could come to him in the shadows. The eyes, sharp and steely, would not give him away. Strange eyes, Geoff thought. The eyes were looking at him.

The sword swallower put his feet down and flexed his legs, half standing. He opened his mouth, showed his tongue. Then, you know what he did.

He put the cigaret out on his tongue.

"Didn't it..." A throat caught. "Didn't it hurt?"

"Sure it hurt." The sword swallower stepped up to the curtain. "Sure I feel it. *Wouldn't you?*"

Geoff pivoted, somewhat unsteadily. The show must be over, he thought.

Now where was she?

The others stretched and bumped together like wind-up dolls suddenly activated on the dirt floor.

"Exit to your left. This show is —"

"Hey, you're the Pin Head, right? I seen this show before."

Geoff craned his neck. The fat, rumpled man was speaking. To a new man on the platform, come out from behind the curtain.

And there was Sherron, edging over.

"Psst," whispered Geoff, "over here! You're blind as a bat, aren't you? I was looking for —"

"Is that the Pin Head?" She gave him her hands but not her attention.

Geoff sighed. "That's all, honey," he said, "there ain't no more."

"I am the Human Pin Cushion," said the man on the stage.

"I wanna see some more," said Sherron.

The man heard her. "Very well," he said, since the sailors had stopped by the tent flap, blocking the others from leaving.

Her fingers were cold. Geoff

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wanted to pull away, but made himself hold on.

The man, the Human Pin Cushion, was old, old. Bushy brows. A tight, unexpected cupid's-bow mouth between his hanging jowls.

Sherron laughed.

"Don't —" say any more, thought Geoff. There was something about her voice he did not like.

The old man checked his watch resignedly, slid back his sleeve as he took out a pair of spectacles. He had an old leather eyeglass case clipped over his pocket. Without enthusiasm, he produced a long, gleaming hatpin from an envelope. He waved the people closer and prepared himself, pinching up the loose rice-paper skin on his wrist. It pulled into a familiar fold.

"Hey," said a girl, "that picture outside, it shows you sticking pins all over your body."

"That is correct." The old man hesitated, needle poised. "I have passed steel through all areas of my body. I have performed for *The Johnny Car* —" He stopped himself, drew off his glasses, gazing out. "What is it you would have me do?"

"Stick it through your...your..." Giggle. The girl's voice. "Oh, through your tongue."

Geoff forced himself to look.

It was Sherron. It had been her voice all along.

"My God, Sher..." He tried to say her name. "My God."

The old man was looking at her, and so was everyone else. She had come up close to the stage. "No, not that. I've already seen that. Stick it through..."

"Yes, young lady?"

"...Through, oh, your ear," she said impatiently. "Stick it in your ear!"

The old man checked his watch again. The show was folding. He studied her. He pushed back his hair, badly in need of a cut, folded his long ear forward. Salt-and-pepper hairs encrusted the opening above the pendulous lobe. Light from a single miniature spotlight turned the flesh a warm peach color.

He raised the long needle. He held his ear with one hand, placed the point behind the lobe, and pushed it through.

"Not there," said Sherron, "anybody can do that!"

The old man stared her down. He folded his upper ear and pressed with a slow, trembling force, driving the tip through the cartilage in a tiny stirring motion.

He stepped to the edge, the needle penetrating his ear in two places. He looked down past his chins at the girl. At Sherron.

"You are satisfied now?" he asked.

"How come you don't bleed?"

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she said defiantly.

The old man stepped back. He grasped the ball on the end of the needle. "This show," he said, "is over." And then, to Sherron alone, he said:

"What do you think I am? Don't you think we are human?

"Of course we bleed."

He pulled the needle as if lowering a sword from salute.

A stream of blood coursed immediately from his ear. It gushed down his neck and spattered to the boards.

Then he left the stage.

Geoff forced a path out. He put a hand to his forehead and hurried away from the pike. He was aware of the tarpaulined machinery of thrill rides, canvased shapes and empty attractions. A mist of dew was already forming on the glass of the fortune shop but he did not see it as he passed. He zipped his windbreaker and continued to his car, refusing to break stride, and as the girl Sherron strove to keep pace, laughing at him as the fog rolled in, cajoling, finally silent and unintentionally merciful, he felt, no, he knew, at last, that he was alone now after all, as he walked, quite alone.

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THE MAGIC ISLE

I was never very good in my lab courses. Whatever gifts I have, none of them include deftness in experimental work. Teachers who were in any way involved with me discovered this early and reacted to it in different ways.

At one extreme was Charles Reginald Dawson of the Chemistry Department at Columbia University, who supervised my work toward the doctorate. Once, when I had been more than ordinarily undeft in one of my procedures he said to me in the kindly way that never deserted him, "That's all right, Isaac. We'll get someone to do the experiments for you, if necessary. You just keep on having the ideas."*

At the other extreme was Joseph Edward Mayer with whom I took a lab course in physical chemistry in 1940. I received a very low mark from him on my report of an experiment on the boiling-point elevation of solutions.

I was not overly surprised at this, since my expectations in lab courses were never exuberantly high, but I thought I might as well see Professor Mayer and attempt

**I have never stopped feeling grateful to Professor Dawson for this, and for numerous other kindnesses.*

ISAAC ASIMOV

Science

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negotiation. I brought my paper with me and he went over it patiently. I was quite prepared to be told that I had done the experiment sloppily or that I had collected my data thoughtlessly. That wasn't it, however. Professor Mayer looked up at me and said:

"The trouble with you, Asimov, is that you can't write."

For a horrified moment, I stared at him. God knows not everyone likes the material I turn out, and a depressingly large number of people say so to my face, but no one has ever seriously told me that I can't write. Except Professor Mayer.

It was an insult I could not abide, and I lost all interest in discussing my paper. I gathered up the report and, before leaving, said to him as stiffly and as haughtily as I could, "I'll thank you, Professor Mayer, not to repeat that slander to my publishers."

I passed the course, naturally, but I don't think I ever spoke to Professor Mayer again. Nor, in all the time that has since passed, have I forgotten that remark.

Professor Mayer has had a distinguished career in physical chemistry, but his greatest claim to fame is having married a physicist, Maria Goeppert, in 1930. She held on to her name by hyphenating it — so that she came to be known as Maria Goeppert-Mayer — and under that name won a share of the 1963 Nobel Prize in physics.

When the announcement reached the papers, my reaction was the simple self-centered one you would expect of a writer. I said, "How do you like that? Goeppert-Mayer has just received a Nobel Prize and yet her husband once told me I couldn't write."

Oh, well, I didn't *really* think her husband's error of judgement ought to have disqualified her, so let's forgive and forget, and talk about the work which earned the prize for her.

We'll begin by considering the nuclei of the atoms of the various elements. Each atomic nucleus of a particular atom is made up of a certain number of protons, plus (in the case of every nucleus but the very simplest) a certain number of neutrons as well.

For each particular element, the number of protons in its atomic nuclei is fixed and cannot vary. For instance, all oxygen nuclei have exactly 8 protons. If one proton is lost, for any reason, the nucleus is no longer oxygen, but nitrogen. If one proton is gained, for any reason, the nucleus is no longer oxygen, but fluorine. The number of protons characteristic of the nuclei of a particular element is the "atomic number" of that element.

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The number of neutrons present in the atomic nuclei of a particular element can, however, vary to a certain degree. An oxygen nucleus can contain 8, 9, or 10 neutrons. In each of these cases, the oxygen nucleus that results is stable. That is, left to itself, it will remain unchanged for an indefinite period of time, presumably forever.

These three varieties of oxygen nuclei are "nuclides," and we can identify them in accordance with the total number of particles, protons plus neutrons, that they contain. We can say that oxygen-16, oxygen-17 and oxygen-18 are the three stable oxygen nuclides, and 16, 17, and 18 are the respective "mass numbers" of those nuclides.

Other nuclides of oxygen are possible. An oxygen nucleus, along with the 8 protons might have only 7 neutrons, or even only 6; it might have as many as 11 or even 12. These nuclides, oxygen-14, oxygen-15, oxygen-19 and oxygen-20 are all unstable, however. If such a nuclide comes to exist, it breaks down spontaneously, even when left to itself, and does so in a matter of seconds.

Of course, not all unstable nuclides of the various elements break down in seconds or even in a few years. Some nuclides are not truly stable but nevertheless endure for billions of years before most of the nuclei break down (see THE UNETERNAL ATOMS, March 1974). For the purposes of this article, we will consider such nuclides effectively stable since some of them remain unbroken-down to this day.

The next question is: How do other elements compare to oxygen in the number of stable nuclides they possess?

The answer is that some elements have more nuclides and some have fewer. Let us, however, do a little classification.

We find that elements of odd atomic number, that is elements with odd numbers of protons in their nuclei, are not remarkable for the number of stable, or nearly stable, nuclides they possess. Potassium, with an atomic number of 19 has three. All the others have two or fewer.

The situation is quite different with the even-proton elements. While the three smallest of these have only one or two stable nuclides (beryllium has only one, and helium and carbon have only two each), all the others, up to and including atomic number 82, have three or more stable or nearly stable nuclides.

In general, then, we can conclude that for a nucleus to possess an even number of protons is a more stable situation than for it to possess an odd number. There are more even-proton nuclides than there are odd-proton nuclides, and the even-proton nuclides occur much more commonly in

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nature. In fact, most of the even-proton nuclides also have an even number of neutrons and the even-proton-even-neutron nuclides make up the bulk of the Universe, if we exclude hydrogen as a special case.*

This much I discussed in my article THE EVENS HAVE IT (F & SF, August 1961) but now let's go further. Which element has the most stable nuclides?

The answer is tin, with no less than ten stable nuclides. Tin has an atomic number of 50 so that it seems that a nuclide with 50 protons possesses so stable a configuration in that respect that the number of neutrons present can vary through an unusually wide set of values without upsetting the stability of the nucleus.

Is there something unusual about the number 50, then? Suppose we consider those atomic nuclei which have 50 neutrons. How many different nuclei, possessing 50 neutrons, are stable? The answer is six, which is unusually high.†

There are thus sixteen different varieties of stable nuclei which possess either 50 protons or 50 neutrons.

Fifty seemed such a mysteriously significant number with reference to the stability of nuclear structure that in 1949, the German physicist, J. Hans Daniel Jensen (who eventually shared the Nobel Prize with Goeppert-Mayer) used the term "magic number" in connection with it. In my opinion, that's bad, since the word "magic" should not be used in connection with science, and Jensen later introduced the term "shell number" which is much better. The latter doesn't have a chance, though. Scientists are human and "magic number" is so much more dramatic that even I like to use it.

Are there any other magic numbers? If 50 holds the record for proton-stability, what about neutron-stability? Is there any neutron-number that is represented in more than 6 stable nuclides? Yes,

**The simplest hydrogen nuclide, hydrogen-1, has a nucleus made up of a single proton and nothing more. A single-particle nucleus is bound to be more stable than any combination of particles; so it is not surprising that about 90 percent of all the atoms in the Universe are hydrogen-1, and that the percentage was higher still in the early days of the Universe. In this article, we talk of composite nuclei only, and, to be sure, in* some *respects,* some *composite nuclei are more stable than hydrogen-1 is.*

†If you are curious, the six 50-neutron stable nuclei are krypton-86, rubidium-87 (which is slightly unstable), strontium-88, yttrium-89, zirconium-90 and molybdenum-92.

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there are *seven* stable nuclides, from xenon-136 (54 protons, 82 neutrons) to samarium-144 (62 protons, 82 neutrons) which have 82 neutrons in their nuclei.

What's more, there are four stable nuclides which have 82 protons in their nuclei (representing the element, lead). Four may not seem like much, but 82 protons represents very nearly the edge of possible stability. There is only one stable nuclide with 83 protons and none at all that are completely stable yet possess more than 83 protons (though there are three that are nearly stable.) Four stable 82-proton nuclides is therefore rather remarkable and if that is added to the seven 82-neutron nuclides, we might suspect that 82 is a magic number also.

Among the nuclides with fewer particles (where the chances of variation are more limited, in general) there are a surprising number with either 20 neutrons (five of them) or 20 protons (five more) so we might consider 20 a magic number.

Another way of judging stability is by considering the abundance of particular nuclides in the Universe generally. We are not sure exactly how the various nuclides were formed. Presumably the Universe began as a collection of hydrogen-1 nuclei (mere protons) together with perhaps a smattering of simple composite nuclides such as hydrogen-2, helium-3 and helium-4.

Through various nuclear reactions taking place in the core of stars, more complicated atomic nuclei are formed and these are scattered abroad in stellar explosions. In general, the more complicated the nucleus the less abundant it is on a cosmic scale, but this is not a perfectly smooth relationship.

Whatever the manner in which the nuclei are formed those that are more stable than others are formed more easily and broken up with greater difficulty. They therefore accumulate in greater amounts.

Among the nuclides which occur in the Universe to a distinctly greater degree than other nuclides of similar complexity are the following: helium-4 (2 protons and 2 neutrons), oxygen-16 (8 protons and 8 neutrons), silicon-28 (14 protons and 14 neutrons), calcium-40 (20 protons and 20 neutrons) and iron-56 (26 protons and 30 neutrons).

The matter of abundance is perhaps not a fine enough test since the presence of magic numbers may not be the only factor involved. Nuclear physicists go at it in another way, too. They check on the readiness with which a particular nucleus will absorb a neutron. The less ready it is to do

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so, the more satisfied the nucleus is with its existing arrangement and the more likely it is to possess a magic number. Again, some nuclei, if excited and made energetic, will give off a neutron. They will do this most readily if their number of neutrons is just one above a magic number.

Put all the data together and it would seem as if 14, 26, and 30 are not magic numbers and silicon-28 and iron-56 owe their abundance to other factors. The magic numbers are 2, 8, 20, 28, 40, 50, and 82 for either protons or neutrons. Beyond that the two particles differ. A high magic number for protons is 114; for neutrons 126 and 184.

Why are those numbers magic? Independently, Goeppert-Mayer in 1948 and Jensen in 1949 worked out a "shell model" of the nucleus that won them their shares of the Nobel Prize. The protons and neutrons, according to this model, exist in concentric shells, each one larger than the one within. A nucleus is particularly stable if the protons, or neutrons, or, most particularly both, exist in completed shells or sub-shells and that is why "shell numbers" is the better term.

There are two nuclei with the magic number 2: helium-3 and helium-4. Helium-3 has 2 protons and 1 neutron while helium-4 has 2 protons and 2 neutrons. The double-helping of magic number makes helium-4 the most stable composite nucleus there is. Of the helium atoms in the Universe only about one out of a million is helium-3, and when a complex nucleus breaks down into something simpler, it often does so by emitting an intact helium-4 nucleus (an "alpha particle"). Indeed, helium-4 is more stable in many ways than hydrogen-1, and it is the tendency to move from hydrogen-1 to helium-4 that powers the stars and, more than anything else, makes our Universe what it is.

There are four stable nuclides which contain either 8 protons or 8 neutrons, and of these it is oxygen-16, with 8 protons *and* 8 neutrons, that contains the double dose. In the Universe there are at least 300 times as many oxygen-16 nuclei as there are of the other three nuclides put together.

There are no less than ten nuclei with the magic number 20. Again the most common of these in the Universe is the one with the double dose, calcium-40 which contains 20 protons and 20 neutrons.

By now, however, a new factor enters. Among the smaller nuclei, the most abundant and, therefore the most stable, are those with equal numbers of protons and neutrons. The two types of particles do not, however, pack together in precisely equal manner.

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All the particles in a nucleus are held together by way of "nuclear force," but whereas there is nothing to counteract this in neutron-neutron or neutron-proton combinations, the story is different in proton-proton combinations.

Between two protons there is a repulsion mediated by the "electromagnetic force." This exists only between electrically-charged particles; the proton being electrically-charged while the neutron is not.

At small distances, such as those involved in the smaller nuclei, the nuclear force is much stronger than the electromagnetic force and the latter can be neglected. The nuclear force, however, fades off rapidly with distance while the electromagnetic force fades off only slowly. As the nucleus gets larger, therefore, the electromagnetic force, from end to end of the nucleus, produces a repulsion effect which tends to break up the nucleus and which is with more and more difficulty countered by the rapidly weakening nuclear force.

Consequently, as a nucleus grows larger, the number of neutrons it contains must begin to outstrip the number of protons more and more. A greater number of neutrons adds to the nuclear-force attraction, without adding to the elctromagnetic-force repulsion.

Calcium-40 is the largest stable nuclide containing equal numbers of protons and neutrons. If we go beyond that the neutron excess builds steadily. Tin-120, for instance, contains 50 protons and 70 neutrons — a neutron-excess of 20. The most massive stable nuclide is that of bismuth-209, which is made up of 83 protons and 126 neutrons for a neutron excess of 43.

Any nucleus which contains more than 83 protons cannot be made stable, apparently, no matter how many neutrons are added. The electromagnetic force will do its work of repulsion and the nucleus will break up sooner or later and fly apart. Three of the known nuclides with atomic numbers of more than 83 are nearly stable, and consequently still exist in the Earth's crust. Of these the most massive is uranium-238, and its nucleus contains 92 protons and 146 neutrons, for a neutron-excess of 54.

If we go beyond calcium-40, then, we can no longer expect double doses of a particular magic number to confer stability. Double doses there may be, but in that case the protons are at one magic number and the neutrons are at another and higher magic number.

There are ten stable nuclides with the magic number 28 in either

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protons or neutrons, nine with 40, sixteen with 50, eleven with 82. There is also a nuclide with the magic number 126, which applies only to neutrons.

Of these, exactly three have double doses of magic numbers. They are calcium-48 with 20 protons and 28 neutrons; zirconium-90 with 40 protons and 50 neutrons; and lead-208 with 82 protons and 126 neutrons.

Calcium-48 is not quite stable, but it's half life is in the neighborhood of several tens of quintillions of years, so we might as well consider it stable.

If it didn't have a double dose of magic numbers, it is quite likely that it would be distinctly unstable. It is the most massive of the stable calcium nuclides and has a neutron-excess of 8. This is an extraordinarily high neutron-excess for such a small nucleus. The next larger stable nuclide with so high a neutron-excess is nickel-64, with 28 protons and 36 neutrons.

The power of the magic numbers shows up more remarkably if we consider the neutron/proton ratio. In calcium-48, the neutron/proton ratio is 1.4; that is there are 1.4 neutrons for every proton. Nickel-64 may have a neutron-excess of 8, but its neutron/proton ratio is only 1.29. It is not until we reach selenium-82 (34 protons and 48 neutrons) that we reach a neutron/proton ratio higher than that of calcium-48.

Again, though there are ten nuclides that possess either 40 protons or 50 neutrons, only zirconium-90 possesses both. It should not be surprising therefore to find that zirconium-90 is, of these ten nuclides, the most abundantly distributed in nature.

That brings us to the final double-dose nuclide, lead-208.

Lead-208 is the second most massive of the stable nuclides. It falls short of bismuth-209 by one unit. However, in lead-208, there are 82 protons and 126 neutrons for a neutron-excess of 44, which is one greater than that of bismuth-209. It is, in fact, the largest neutron-excess among all the stable nuclides.

The neutron/proton ratio is 1.537 for lead-208. This is higher than the ratio of 1.518 which bismuth-209 possesses. Lead-208 does not hold the record for the highest ratio among the stable nuclei. Mercury-204, with 80 protons and 124 neutrons has a neutron/proton ratio of 1.550. However, mercury-204 makes up only one-fifteenth of all the mercury nuclei there are, whereas lead-208 makes up over half of all the lead nuclei. Again, there are well over ten times as many lead-208 nuclei in the Universe generally than mercury-204 nuclei.

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Suppose you make a plot of the number of protons against the number of neutrons among the stable nuclides. The protons increase steadily as you move upward, the neutrons increase steadily as you move rightward.

Among the simpler nuclides only those would be stable in which the number of protons and the number of neutrons are equal or nearly equal. We would get a thickish line, then, starting from the origin and making an angle of 45 degrees to the horizontal. As the nuclides grow more complicated, there are present a larger and larger excess of neutrons so the line begins to curve and become more nearly horizontal. Eventually, it peters out. Even if the nearly-stable nuclei are included, the line does not go past the 92-proton mark.

This thickish line of stability is sometimes called the "peninsula of stability" and is pictured as being surrounded by the "sea of instability" which is represented by all nuclides which have too few neutrons or too many neutrons to hold the protons together — or too many protons to be held together by any number of neutrons.

The peninsula of stability can be marked off in a third dimension. We can imagine each nucleus placed at a certain height above the chart, that height being proportional to the extent of its stability as measured by certain of its properties. Naturally, those nuclei which contain a magic number of protons, neutrons, or, most particularly, both, will represent peaks of altitude. Romantic scientists have named certain regions of the peninsula of stability, therefore, in such ways as "magic ridge" and "magic mountain."

The peninsula is not really solid. For instance, there are no stable nuclides of technetium (atomic number 43) or promethium (atomic number 61). That means the vertical lines representing 43 protons or 61 protons are empty. I have never heard of these empty lines being named but I will make so bold as to invent one and call them "proton straits of instability." There are also no stable nuclides with neutrons numbering 19, 35, 39, 45, 61, 89, 115, and 123 and these, by the same token, would represent "neutron straits of instability."

It is interesting that there is no stable or nearly-stable nucleus which contains either 61 protons or 61 neutrons, so that 61 seems to be an "anti-magic number" (again my own term).

If we look at the upper end of the peninsula of stability, we see that it ravels off. Beyond the 83-proton mark there is a wide strait of instability, for there are no stable or nearly stable nuclides with proton-numbers from 84 to 89 inclusive. There is then one nearly stable nucleus with 90 protons

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(thorium-232) and two with 92 protons (uranium-235 and uranium-238). We might refer to this sudden emergence from the sea of instability as the "thorium-uranium island" (again my own term).

But what lies beyond uranium? In the last third of a century nuclear physicists have painfully built up nuclei more complicated than those of uranium, progressing through higher and higher atomic numbers until, as of now, nuclides with as many as 106 protons (and, of course, a considerably higher number of neutrons) have been produced.

On the whole, all of these trans-uranium nuclides are unstable, though a few of the smaller ones such as neptunium-237 (93 protons and 144 neutrons) and plutonium-244 (94 protons and 150 neutrons) have half lives in the millions of years. Stability tends to decrease as the atomic number increases. For the really complicated nuclides, the half lives are a matter of minutes or less.

But in going beyond uranium, we have not yet reached a new magic number. Beyond atomic number 82 (lead) we do not reach a new magic number for protons till we come to 114. Beyond a neutron number of 126 (which is found in lead-208) the next higher neutron magic number is 184. What happens, then, if we reach a nuclide made up of 114 protons and 184 neutrons?

An element with atomic number 114 would be "eka-lead" since it would be just below lead in the periodic table (see SURPRISE! SURPRISE! June 1976) and we are therefore talking of the nuclide, eka-lead-298. With a double dose of magic numbers, should not eka-lead-298 be more stable than the other nuclides lying between it and uranium? Even if it were not completely stable, might it not be nearly

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stable, enough so as to have small quantities still existing in the crust?

Other nuclei in the neighborhood of eka-lead-298 might also be nearly stable so that out in the sea of instability, well beyond the thorium-uranium island there might be another small island of stability, or a "magic isle" of "super-heavy nuclei."

And now, for the first time, a bit of evidence in favor of the existence of the magic isle has cropped up.

In certain samples of the transparent mineral mica, obtained in Madagascar, there are small black discs called "halos." These were first noted in the 1880s, and it is now known that they arise from the inclusion of small bits of radioactive minerals containing thorium and uranium. The thorium and uranium nuclei explode now and then, giving off alpha particles which penetrate the mica for a given distance and discolor it.

The size of most of the halos can be easily matched to the energy and penetrating power of alpha particles from thorium and uranium nuclei. One out of a thousand of the halos, however, is too big. They require alpha particles with twice the penetrating power of those that occur in nature.

A group of physicists, headed by Robert V. Gentry of Oak Ridge, speculated that small quantities of super-heavies were the source of the giant halos. They bombarded the giant halos with low-energy protons under circumstances that should produce x-rays on their collision with nuclei. The wavelength of the x-rays would depend on the atomic number of the nuclei, and if certain wavelengths were detected that would amount to the finding of super-heavy nuclei. Such wavelengths were indeed received in tiny amounts, and this *may* represent the first landing by nuclear-physicist Columbuses on the magic isle.

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Joseph Green's latest story (written in collaboration with his wife) is an inventive and moving tale about a young woman whose sense of sight undergoes a mysterious and frightening change.

To See The Stars That Blind

by JOSEPH GREEN and PATRICE MILTON

"Rennie? Rennie, wake up, please. I think I'm going blind."

I opened sleep-fogged eyes, to see a blurry Happy sitting on her heels by my head. She had the tent flap thrown back and was staring out at the new day. Sharply slanting rays of sunlight fought their way through the roof of spruce needles overhead, creating a multitude of small brilliant spotlights on the forest floor. The autumnal air was crisp and cool, loaded with the mingled scents of columbine and mountain gentian, arnica and spreading phlox.

Happy's words finally penetrated my torpid brain, shocking me fully awake. I unzipped my half of the cover and threw it back, sitting up beside her and rubbing my eyes. Her model-slim nude form came into clear focus. I saw a speckling of goosebumps on her milk-white arm and delicately bony shoulder.

Happy turned to face me. She had slept with her long straight black hair gathered behind her head. I saw the clean and clearly defined planes and angles of a face of fragile, almost ethereal beauty. The sight startled me, as it did each time I looked at her with freshened vision. She had always seemed to me a creature born of the air, light and lovely as thistledown, capable of floating away on any vagrant zephyr.

A recent memory stirred. Happy had said something last night about her eyesight being distorted. The flickering light from our campfire had seemed to cause her pain. I had thought it simple fatigue, brought on by a long day of hiking over these rugged western slopes of the Cascades.

"I can still see, but everything is... different." Happy groped for my hand without looking, held on as though it were an anchor in reality. "The world turned red while I

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slept. I see dark-red trees, light-red bushes, a brownish-red tent. I saw a little ground squirrel a minute ago, and he was a fiery scarlet, as though... all his blood had moved to the outside. Rennie, what's happening to me?"

I put an arm around her shoulders. She had been quietly sitting there for several minutes; her smooth skin was cold to the touch. "I don't know. Maybe you've broken a blood vessel in one eye. But whatever it is, we're heading back today. You need a doctor."

My bride of almost three months was silent, still staring out at a world that had abruptly changed, become something strange and disturbing. She held me back when I reached for my clothes, lying across the back of the inflated double sleeping bag. "That's not it, Rennie. The — the ground has almost disappeared over there, where the sunlight hits direct. I seem to see a little lake, filled with red fire... it has flickering edges. And that big rock there —" she pointed to a car-sized boulder about fifty feet away "— it's almost gone. All I can see is some dim kind of reddish blur."

I pulled free of her hand and scrambled into my thick plaid shirt and sturdy denim pants. Slowly, with lingering glances through the tentflap at the peaceful mountain scene, Happy dressed herself. She seemed to be operating mostly by feel, though there was plenty of light in the small tent.

Happy tried to cook breakfast while I broke camp, but couldn't manage it. She became upset and cried, but only for a minute. We finally settled for foodsticks, and coffee which I made. An hour after that weird awakening we had the backpacks ready and headed for home.

Happy gave me a running commentary on how the world looked as we crossed a high-level grassy meadow. She could see reasonably well at a distance, or in the shade. She was virtually blind in direct sunlight. "It's like walking through a shallow sea of red light, while it rains more," she told me. Some signs of strain were beginning to show in her normally soft voice. She sounded both afraid and intrigued. "I can't see my feet, or the grass, but the rain of light is thin enough I can look through it into the distance. And it doesn't get thicker further away, as a watery rain would. I don't understand this at all."

Neither did I, but I knew what to do about it — get help for Happy as fast as possible. I had changed my mind about returning the way we had entered these woods, three days before. We were only a few miles northwest of Snoqualmie Pass and Interstate 90. With luck, we

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could be on that road before dark. It led straight to Seattle and home, an hour's ride to the west.

My timing was a little off, due to having to lead Happy by the hand most of the way. We still made it to the highway just after dark, coming out several miles west of the lodge at Snoqualmie. The first west-bound motorist we flagged obligingly stopped, and our planned two-week camping trip in the autumn glory of the Cascades was abruptly over.

The friendly motorist dropped us at the Bellevue Airfield, where we caught a taxi home. I had worried at the problem of Happy's distorted eyesight all day, but gotten nowhere. We needed expert help. And a slow suspicion was growing in the back of my skull that even the experts might be stumped. The sense of dread and foreboding that had hovered over us all day descended heavily with the night, wrapping us in a dark blanket of gloom.

The final surprise of the night came as we stood on our doorstep, me fumbling with the key. Happy touched my arm and pointed to the thick beds of foxglove that bordered our concrete driveway on both sides. "Rennie... those two rabbits are back, eating our flowers. And — honey, I can see them through the bushes! The plants are dark and seem almost dead, but the rabbits are flowing red shapes, with big ears... they keep looking up every few seconds. They hear us and are waiting to see if we know they're there."

That was almost too much for me. Whatever strange malady might have struck Happy, it shouldn't have given her the ability to see through two wide banks of dense flowers in a very dim light. The thought I had refused to confront since being awakened that morning finally forced its way forward: My sensitive young wife was undergoing some unusual form of mental breakdown.

Happy sensed my feeling of despair and unwillingness to believe. "Please go and see," she whispered.

I walked quietly back to the sidewalk, down it past our drive, and back up on the opposite side of the flower border. Suddenly two brown forms streaked away into the shadows, almost from beneath my feet. There was no mistaking our two friendly and unusually bold wild rabbits.

I returned to Happy feeling lost and chagrined. Although her daylight vision had become crippled and uncertain, she had just demonstrated she could see better in the dark than any cat.

Once inside with the fluorescents on, Happy was nearly blind again. I prepared us a hasty late meal of hot soup and sandwiches,

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while she set the table and described what she saw. All the familiar objects of our kitchen no longer appeared solid and real; to her they seemed bulky blurs of red. The refrigerator shimmered, while the wavy lines of the curtains almost danced. The flame of the gas stove gave off flickering coruscations of red light, streaked with darker inner fires. Happy said the flame was uniquely beautiful, somewhat like watching a hologram show at the Pacific Science Center.

It had been a long, hard day. By eleven we were in bed. In the true darkness we held each other close and made love with the desperate earnestness of two people no longer sure of one another. She writhed and heaved above me like a lean cheetah, as savagely sexual and fiercely demanding as any jungle cat. The strength in her slim form, when aroused to passion, never failed to amaze me.

But afterwards she cried for an hour and would not be comforted.

Next morning Happy was totally blind.

Somehow I had been prepared for that. Blindness seemed the next logical step, an unexpected event. But I was completely dismayed when Happy quietly added, "Rennie... now I hear strange noises."

It took me a moment to recover my self-possession. Even then I could do nothing except suggest we worry about one thing at a time. But the ugly suspicion that had hatched in my mind the previous night was steadily growing, swelling now toward a certainty. Happy was going insane.

Now I, Renfrew Simon Hollister, 38-year-old high-school teacher and would-be poet, know very little about mental illness. I took my doctorate in Renaissance literature. I'm big and strong and not too pretty. I like to hike, camp, and fish. Hunting I do with a camera. I had married a beautiful young woman 15 years my junior because I fell hopelessly in love with her fragile beauty the first time my poetry club and her art class held a joint dinner meeting. Wife Lois and I were already on the outs, and an amicable divorce soon followed.

To my pleased surprise, Happy Dawn Dent had been relatively easy to persuade. We were married the night of the last day of school, May 30, 1994. I declined to teach classes that summer, and we settled down to three months of perfect bliss.

And we had come close to reaching that happy state, before starting the ill-fated camping trip during my last two weeks off.

I helped Happy dress, led her to the car, and drove us to the ophthalmologist's office. On the way downtown she told me a little more about the new malady. She was hearing chattering and clicking

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sounds, strung together in purposeful sequences but making no sense to her. By the time we reached the doctor's office the nature of the sounds had changed. And while we were sitting with enforced patience in the waiting room — only my desperate plea that it was an emergency had gotten us an unscheduled appointment — Happy leaned toward me until she found my ear.

"Rennie — now I'm seeing something very funny, and it doesn't matter if my eyes are closed or open, I still see it. I'm watching the morning show on Channel 64."

I patted Happy's hand, while I cried inside. There was no longer any believable doubt. My slim and sexy darling had slipped over the edge of some unseen mental cliff, was dropping swiftly into a yawning black abyss, where hidden monsters lurked in dark cave mouths, waiting. No eye doctor could help her.

And so it proved. After a two-hour wait we were finally admitted. The doctor was a slight, silver-haired old man with a nervous and fussy manner. He was also experienced, kind, and thorough. When he finally finished he asked a nurse to escort Happy back to the waiting room, while he discussed her strange case with me.

"Mr. Hollister, I, ah — really, I can't see any signs of trauma. Unless there is an internal nerve debility that would require more extensive tests... ah, I doubt it. To speak frankly — your wife seems to be suffering from a not uncommon form of hysteria, a self-imposed paralysis of the optic nerve, or perhaps some problem with the analytic portion of the frontal lobe. She can see, in my opinion, but some inner compulsion — ah, refuses to allow her to do so. I feel that you should take her to a psychiatrist — and soon."

I thanked him, filed my insurance forms, and took Happy home. He was right, of course, but I couldn't quite bring myself to take that step — at least not yet.

"The channels have changed twice," Happy said as I pulled into our flower-lined drive. "For a few minutes I was getting Channel 41, and now I'm watching 16. There's an old Burt Reynolds movie on. He's become a much better actor in the last twenty years."

As soon as we were inside, Happy told me she had made the transition from UHF to VHF, and was now watching Channel 13. And over the next hour she slowly worked her way down through the three high-number TV stations in the Seattle area. I dug out the TV guide and checked her. She was correctly calling out the programs each time. About one o'clock she hit the FM band, and so many stations came in at once, she said, that

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it was just a jumble of noise. After that she went through Channels 6, 4, and 2. Before dark she was hearing shortwave broadcasts on the police and amateur bands.

"That doctor thinks I'm off center, doesn't he?" Happy asked abruptly as I prepared our dinner. "Do you think so, Rennie? I probably would, if this had happened to you."

"Of course that possibility occurred to me," I admitted.

"Of course. And I wondered myself, at first. But not any more. This is real, Rennie. Somehow I've become a — a human antenna, and I really am seeing all those programs inside my head. Oh, wait, the police calls just faded out. What do you know, it's quiet for the moment."

But that lasted only a few seconds before she cried out, with heartbreak in her voice: *"Oh, Rennie, now it's AM radio!"*

By bedtime Happy had worked her way through all the Seattle area stations and afterwards had a period of blessed silence. I watched the dial as she called off each station's name, when she was lucky enough to pick one up. She had started at the highest number and proceeded down the scale. It didn't seem to matter how strong or weak the signal was, just its frequency. She heard some stations in Renton and Everett we couldn't normally get on our combo set.

We were in the habit of making love almost every night, but both felt too heartsick for it this time. Instead Happy held me close in the darkness, as though I needed comforting more than she. And in a way I did. She was having a strange new experience, and weird and improbable though it might be, at least she was in the middle of the action. I could only stand aside and look on.

Happy's self-possession under stress was surprising to me. She was an art major, an amateur in oils, a local artist of fair and promising ability. She was also moody, somewhat flighty, given to quick-tempered outbursts, as quickly forgotten. She did not suffer pain or trouble with forbearance. She was also a very loving and tender person, a woman who gave completely when she committed herself. And she demanded equal committment from her partner in life.

Happy made me promise I wouldn't ask her to see a psychiatrist, at least for now. She agreed she would go voluntarily if the condition didn't clear up.

Next morning was not a "Happy Dawn" for us. She was still hearing the AM broadcasts. I put on the earphones, found the stations, and listened to her repeating the dialogue word-for-word. She could sing the songs or hum the music a second after I heard them.

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I was beginning to agree with Happy that this was not a problem for the dome doctors. I'm no engineer, but I had taken the mandatory six hours of physics in my undergraduate years. I know a little about radio signals, frequency and amplitude modulation, the fact that radio waves penetrate the ozone layer after they reach a certain high frequency instead of bouncing back to earth, etc. And nothing I knew could pretend to explain this affliction of Happy's.

I caught one oddity that we had to ignore at the moment. Happy was working her way back *up* the AM scale, moving from the bottom of the dial to the top. After that she switched to the shortwave again, and I think made her way upward through that spectrum. The next stations we could identify were the VHF television broadcasts. It seemed reasonable to think she'd be back into the UHF range before dark.

If psychiatry was out because this puzzling phenomenon was real, then I needed help of a different sort. I called Hank Aronson, a good friend who taught electrical engineering at the University of Washington. The UofW is the largest educational institution in the Northwest. Both Hank and I had doctorates from there, but the job market for engineering instructors is much better than for English teachers. He had remained there and was now an associate professor, while I slowly starved teaching high-school English.

I caught Hank at home, and he agreed to come over after finishing his single summer class. He was there before three o'clock, in time to run through the last of the UHF stations with us. We kept the sound off and let Happy stand behind the set, describing what she saw and heard. We learned that the old saw about one picture being worth a thousand words is true — she couldn't pretend to keep up — but her description was accurate enough to convince Hank.

Then I brought Hank up to date on the rest of it. He listened quietly, nodding occasionally but asking few questions. Hank is even larger than I am, a craggy-faced redhead of forty, a descendant of Seattle's early Swedish settlers.

"I don't know any way the human body can be anything but a very inefficient antenna," he rumbled when I finished. "You've probably heard of people picking up radio signals in false teeth, and similar oddities. This is possible. But that wouldn't explain the first phenomenon, the world turning red. I think I know what happened, Happy. You were seeing in the infrared. That's the next range of frequencies below visible light. After that you come down to extra

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high, super high — where the radar bands start — then ultra high and the television stations, and so on down to AM radio."

Happy looked startled. "But what's the connection between seeing in that weird way and listening to a radio station? And how could I have seen in the infrared? I thought that took special goggles."

"Not necessarily. Some snakes have a special membrane they can drop over their eyes which filters out visible light, but lets the infrared through. They can spot an animal hiding behind bushes in the dark, just as you did the rabbits. The warm living bodies glow more brightly than the cool plants. As for the connection between infrared light and radio waves — well, a very good teacher I know said it best. The electromagnetic spectrum seems complicated, but nature provides a simplifying compensation. Electromagnetic waves are identical in every respect, except in frequency and wavelength. The only difference between a TV signal and green light, between radio and radar, is the difference in length between the crests of the waves. Nature designed our bodies to use just one very limited section of the spectrum, that of the six primary colors of light. We have to build instruments to translate the higher or lower frequencies into sound and sight."

Happy nodded as though she understood; more likely she had simply decided it was all completely over her head.

"Hank, what can we *do?*" I asked, feeling lost and helpless.

"Nothing, at the moment. Happy seems to have reversed the original movement along the spectrum and be traveling up it again. If I'm right, she will be back to normal day after tomorrow."

"Meaning that tomorrow she'll be seeing in the infrared again?"

"Right," said Hank.

We left it at that. Hank went home to his dinner, after making us promise to call him next day. Somehow we lived through the hours until bedtime and went to sleep with hopeful hearts. And next morning Happy awoke in a red, red world, and we rejoiced. So far so good.

We were both happier than was really warranted by the return of a limited form of sight. There seems to be something in the human psyche that responds to a demonstration of control over nature, that welcomes a consistent way of seeing the world. We knew no more about the problem than before, but the fact that Hank had made a successful prediction gave us hope.

The sun was shining in a cloudless blue sky. Happy informed me that she planned to spend most of the day on our patio and asked me

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to barbecue the ribs in our freezer for lunch and dinner. She wanted to watch the glowing coals and enjoy the interplay of colors while she had the chance.

It seemed a pleasant enough way to pass a day of waiting. From our backyard you could see the rain-drenched slopes of the Olympics towering across Puget Sound to the west, and the more rugged peaks of the Cascades to the east. In the southeast the inverted ice cone of Mount Ranier rose 14,400 feet above sea level, wearing its several glaciers like icy flowing jewels. At the right time of year our scenery can be incredibly beautiful.

Happy wandered restlessly around the yard while I cooked the ribs, sometimes staring at the distant mountains, at others kneeling for several minutes to study a single flower. We have a hodgepodge of plants, the only criterion being that I like them. Tulips and daffodils grew in carefully tended beds, roses ran along one fence, and gladioli blooms grew tall in one corner. Happy seemed to be trying to contrast the local colors with what she could see at a distance. When I asked, she confirmed my guess.

"It's very strange to see this way, Rennie, but it's oddly beautiful too. All the warm tones are just unbelievably rich, while the white to violet are faint and dim. It's a whole different way of seeing the world, and in some ways it's... better."

That kind of talk scared hell out of me. I didn't want Happy to become enraptured with this peculiar form of sight. But after a moment's thought I stopped worrying. Hank understood the situation. Happy would be back to normal in the morning.

And so she was. I heaved a giant sigh of relief. Happy seemed equally glad, but after a time I noticed she was somewhat pensive, a little too quiet. We busied ourselves taking care of some long-overdue shopping, visited her parents, who thought we were still in the Cascades, and dropped in to share the good news with Hank. He was as pleased as ourselves that Happy's unique affliction, whatever it was, had gone away.

Next day was Saturday, my last free weekend before school started. We had decided to get up early and go fishing for steelhead trout, in a favorite beautiful little stream just north of Issaquah. But when I gently shook Happy awake she sleepily sat up, opened her eyes — and I saw her stiffen in shock and surprise.

"What is it!" I demanded in near panic.

"The world is blue!" she said, and there was wonder, and a trace of hidden joy in her voice.

My sense of panic grew strong-

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er. Even I knew that ultraviolet was the next range above visible light. A hole seemed to open in the bottom of my diaphragm and let my guts fall through, followed by my heart. There was only fear and trembling in *my* voice when I asked Happy if she could see normally.

"Almost, Rennie. This isn't like seeing in infrared. Everything has a blue tinge, but the objects aren't... beaming back at me. And living things don't radiate any stronger than the rest. It's not too bad, really. Some of the tones are incredibly soft, like rain-washed skies at dusk. I couldn't see shades this fine before."

I called Hank immediately. Good friend that he is, Hank put off his planned yard work and came over right after breakfast.

Hank promptly ran a series of tests on Happy, asking her to describe familiar objects as they now appeared to her. The results were not very enlightening. We talked about it over coffee, and the discussion was no more helpful than the tests. Hank was fascinated by the new development, but depressed. I was scared spitless. Only Happy seemed calm and unafraid. My impression that she was getting some secret pleasure out of this unique experience grew stronger.

"Happy, I haven't the foggiest idea of what is happening to you," Hank finally admitted. "At first I thought you were having an emotional problem of some kind. Then when you accurately described the video element on all those TV programs..." He shook his head in bewilderment. "Even if your body had somehow become a good antenna, the eye has no way to translate modulated electromagnetic waves into images. That requires the equivalent of phosphor dots on a cathode ray tube. Even if you had the dots, the sweep lines in the eye would have to be so close together... no, I can't explain the TV effect, much less the infrared vision. Now you've moved out of the visible light range again, by continuing on up the spectrum. You're seeing in the near ultraviolet; probably be in the far ultraviolet by dark, at which point your sight should become very poor."

"What happens after that?" I forced myself to ask.

"All indications are that she'll be seeing in the X-ray range tomorrow. And since X-rays, like far ultravoilet, are effectively absorbed by the atmosphere, Happy will become virtually blind."

There was a moment of dead silence. Happy broke it, her voice hovering between laughter and tears: "Could I get a job as a human X-ray machine?"

We chuckled, but it was a forced effort on my part. "No, not really," Hank said, factual as al-

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ways. "Pseudo-science stories about people who suddenly develop X-ray vision and start seeing through walls — and pretty girls' clothes — are highly unrealistic. X-rays have to be generated, and the only major source we have in nature is a star. Good thing, too. If we had a very high flux on the ground, we'd soon be dead from radiation poisoning."

"The blue tones I'm seeing seem to be getting darker," said Happy. "Does that mean I'm moving toward the far ultraviolet?"

"I would think so. I'm going to hang around a few minutes and let you tell me what you see."

Hank called his wife to say he would be delayed, and stayed with us. By a little after noon Happy's vision had shifted into the far ultraviolet, as predicted. Only the loss of sight wasn't as complete as Hank had expected. Evidently there was at least a trace of ultraviolet in the regular light, enough so that Happy could walk without stumbling into solid objects.

"But I can't really *see!*" Happy said in exasperation and started to cry. I held her and let the tears flow. The restraint and control she had displayed since that first morning in the woods had been remarkable, for her. The suspicion that she had been actively enjoying this strange experience until now grew stronger. She had a well-trained eye, and the colors she had been exposed to might have been unique in human history, peculiarly gratifying to an artist. Tuning in on TV and radio programs must have been odd but interesting. This, though, was near-blindness, a crippling condition without beauty or other compensation. She wanted to be rid of the whole weird mess, return to her normal senses.

"If it's X-rays tomorrow, what comes the day after?" I asked Hank.

"Gamma rays, I suppose. But they penetrate the atmosphere even less than X-rays. After that you reach the secondary cosmic ray range, and that's it. Unless you get above the atmosphere, where the primary cosmic ray particles can reach you."

I didn't remember much about cosmic rays. "Can you give us a simplified explanation of what primary cosmic particles are?" I asked, more to divert Happy than because I really wanted to know. She had stopped crying but remained snuggled to my chest, as though afraid to move away.

"I'll try." Hank saw why I was asking. "So-called cosmic rays aren't rays at all, in the sense that the rest of the electromagnetic spectrum is a wave-form of energy. Cosmic rays consist of solid particles, about 85 percent of them single protons — usually the nucleus of what was originally an

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atom of hydrogen. The other 15 percent is electrons and other particles of low mass. The proton is the kicker. They travel at such tremendous speeds that they have enormous energy. When one approaches the Earth it always hits an atom of air, usually fairly high up, and shatters it into its component parts. These components acquire velocities so large they can break up other atoms, and they in turn still more, until the energy level of the moving particle drops below a certain critical point. Some of these secondary impacts will have occurred near enough the surface to be recorded by sensitive instruments."

As a teacher, I realized Hank was oversimplifying his little lecture for our benefit. "Do you have any idea where this is going to lead Happy?" I asked. "If you can predict, you can control..."

"No, not really. I don't think she'll be able to see at all if she moves on into the secondary cosmic ray range, since that isn't a form of light. Our best hope is that she'll start back down again after reaching the gamma ray stage, just as she started up after hitting bottom."

Of course! That seemed so obvious and logical that I mentally kicked myself for not having thought of it. But then a scary thought dawned. Would Happy stop in the visible light range? Or would she go on past into the infrared again and down once more on the same trip? It was a horrible thought. I decided not to think it aloud.

There seemed nothing more Hank could do, and he finally went home. Happy and I were quiet and subdued for the rest of the day. She took a nap in the late afternoon, I think mostly because she wanted to be alone. She awoke completely blind and helpless. I led her to the kitchen and talked with her as I cooked. There seemed little else to do.

Somehow we made the evening pass. Happy wanted to retire early, though she should not have been sleepy. I read aloud to her in bed until my own eyes grew heavy, then discovered she had quietly drifted off. I joined her, wondering what Sunday would bring.

It probably brought X-ray vision, but we had no way of knowing. For all practical purposes, Happy was simply blind. I suppose we could have gotten one of the hospitals to let us experiment with an X-ray machine and verify her unusual sight, but it hardly seemed worth the bother. Happy had started keeping her eyes closed and wanted to wear dark glasses. I talked her out of it. Sunday was a slow day, and we were glad when it finally ended.

Monday began the last week of

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the summer vacation. In fact I was supposed to attend a planning session at the school Thursday. It was also Happy's day to be in the gamma ray range, if the script followed the established pattern. But once again Happy had no way of knowing, since gamma rays penetrate the atmosphere no better than X-rays.

I talked to Hank by phone Monday night. He was becoming as uncertain as myself but seemed to think that Tuesday might bring a turning point. If Happy was going to cycle up and back down the spectrum, it was logical that she would reverse course now. It seemed unlikely she would be able to "see" solid particles.

On Tuesday morning we arose with high hopes. Happy was still blind, but since she would have been in either energy range, that proved nothing. While sipping her coffee at breakfast, she suddenly set the cup down, missing the saucer and slopping brown liquid on the table. There was a startled look on her face.

"Rennie... Rennie, I just saw a faint flash of light. My eyes were closed, and it... came from *inside* one eyeball!"

I had done some reading on cosmic rays Monday and discovered a few things Hank hadn't old us. My heart sank at her words. I had learned that the astronauts frequently reported seeing such flashes inside their eyes. They were caused by a cosmic ray particle striking a rod or cone cell in the fovea, destroying it with the minute energy of an infinitesimal explosion. Which meant that Happy had progressed on up to the cosmic ray range. But the astronauts had their vision cells exposed to the first-order impact of the true proton particle, not a secondary explosion several times removed. Had Happy's affliction made her ultra-sensitive?

Within a half hour Happy saw another flash. She told me about it, then added, in the quiet way in which she announced total disasters: "Rennie, I'm getting very faint messages each time I see a flash."

I took a minute to let my heart slow down to only double time, then asked her what kind of messages. Visual? Oral?

"Both, except that I don't understand the language. It's *very* faint, dear. The — the sound part is just there enough that I can tell it. The vision part is just the faintest trace of an outline, a bare hint of some form. Not enough to actually describe, but, Rennie — they're like nothing on Earth. And I don't think they *are* from Earth!"

And with that I knew my slim partner had slipped over the borderline, was struggling, lost and desperate, in the dark nether re-

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gions on her own faltering mind. She was hallucinating.

Or was she? Even Hank seemed convinced there was an exterior force at work here, an affect that was quite real and demonstrable. Was this instead some new form of sight?

I sensed that this was to be the acid test of my faith in Happy, that I had to reject what she was saying and seek professional help for her — or acknowledge that we had moved out of our known space into some dangerous new frontier, where the perils were unknown and the portents ominous. After today, there would be no turning back.

I thought it over for about thirty seconds, then threw in my lot with Happy. I believed her. We might not know what, or how, or why, but this assault on her senses was a physical thing, and we could choose to fight it.

But I was wrong once more. Happy chose an entirely different course, and feelings that had been carefully suppressed finally broke into the open.

"Rennie? Darling, how much does it cost to take that new one-week special vacation on the Moon?"

I saw what she was driving at and felt a curious sense of ambivalency, a desire to gratify her wishes, allow her this unique experience — a feeling matched by an opposing belief that that course could be dangerous unto death and I might lose my beloved wife.

The Moon trip was an exclusive gimmick intended only for the wealthy, the ultimate in status vacations. High-level government employees had been arranging "inspection" trips to the lunar observatory for years. The hapless astronomers had been forced to enlarge their living quarters until they could accommodate 25 people. The stink had grown so great that the President had finally forced NASA to open up a professional tour service, with a price tag so high that only the rich could afford it — and both had been surprised how good business was among the affluent.

"If we sold the house and cashed in all the bonds I inherited from mother..." I said, thinking aloud. The price was a world-famous figure: $50,000 per person. Happy's question had been a way of asking if I would take her there. It was possible for us because my father had been a shrewd investor and left my mother a considerable estate. She had lived frugally for her few remaining years on the interest alone.

"I couldn't ask such a sacrifice of you, Rennie."

"You could ask me anything I have the power to give. But we have to wait and see what happens before we decide. There's no point

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in trying to get you up where you can feel the cosmic rays direct if you start back down the spectrum tomorrow."

Happy nodded. I saw deeply hidden feelings behind her reserved expression and quiet acceptance. She wanted this exposure very much, to explore what seemed a new human capability to the fullest. At the same time she was as frightened as myself. It was equally plain to her that we were walking a high mountain path in the dark, that loose gravel was underfoot, and a single slip could send us plunging to the unforgiving rocks below.

By Friday we had confirmed what Happy had sensed on Tuesday — that she was not going back down the spectrum. Her peculiar affliction had reached its zenith, and stabilized. The only light she could see was the infrequent flash of a secondary cosmic ray explosion, deep in one eye. And she was still getting hints of messages with each one.

"I want to go, Rennie. I have no right to ask you, no reason... you'd be crazy to do this for me. But I do want it. Will you take me into space?"

And with the chips down for the last play, I learned what kind of man I was — one who could hold nothing back. I did not consciously make a decision, just started doing that which had to be done.

The house sold fast because my first wife and I had picked an unusually good location. Citing Happy's blindness as a medical problem, I took emergency leave instead of reporting to the school. Two weeks after Happy's request, a subdued Hank drove us to the Sea-Tac Airport that served Seattle and Tacoma. Happy wore dark glasses over her closed eyes; this time I didn't argue. We took Marginal Way, past the looming factories of the Boeing Company, then caught a Boeing 7X7 commuter to Vandenberg.

NASA had contracted out the commercial shuttle flights to Transworld Travel, making the old trunk-airline carrier's name an honest description. With only a little more delay than if we had been boarding an SST, we were lifted to our seats in the vertical vehicle, given a personal rundown on the safety procedures, and strapped in. Happy was asked to remove her glasses. We were left lying on our backs, looking straight up at the crew compartment in front. A slow hour passed. And then a thunder I thought would ruin my hearing forever broke out below, the shuttle shuddered and trembled as though beating its metal wings for flight, and we lifted off.

All twenty-four passenger seats in the double row were full. Most of

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the shuttle's cargo bay to our left was sealed off, occupied by a communications satellite and the space tug that would carry it on up to synchronous orbit, 22,300 miles above the equator. The owner of the satellite was picking up the ten-million dollar tab for this trip. Assuming that no more than four of the passengers were free-riding government wheels, we were contributing another million.

We rose swiftly skyward on those giant thundering rockets, while a TV screen on the front wall showed the ground dropping away below. In one minute we were tilting hard over, in three were flying almost flat with the Earth but still gaining altitude, in fifteen had reached our orbital velocity of 17,000 miles an hour and were 300 miles high.

The voice of the captain announced we had reached transfer orbit, and almost immediately Happy saw her first flash. I watched her stiffen, saw an expression of delighted bewilderment appear on her face. Then she slowly leaned back and opened her blind eyes.

"Rennie... Rennie, I love you." She leaned toward me, lips parted, waiting. I kissed her, but tasted distance and withdrawal along with the joy and gratitude. She closed her eyes again.

"That one came through clearly, Rennie. It was just a single glimpse, gone as quick as it appeared, but sharp as... I once saw you. That particle came out of the heart of a sun, it was... *blasted* free and hurled to the surface, where it rode a magnetic field to the plasma wave which carried it into space. But it passed through a kind of net, a — a force field created by a gigantic glassy satellite circling around that star. The field... *marked* that single particle, made some kind of imprint on it without slowing it down, letting it keep its enormous energy but carry a message, a single image."

I was committed now, and no matter how wild the story or unscientific the postulates, I had to believe.

"What did you see?"

Happy laughed. She was talking in a low voice, for my ears alone. "The funniest thing. It was a 'green man.' Isn't that a low blow? A little green man? But he was actually as tall as you are, though I don't know how I could tell height. He looked like a giant frog standing up straight. He had hands, and a very wide mouth full of dark-yellow teeth, and long horny spurs on his ankles, like a fighting rooster. His eyes were big and wet, and he looked very intelligent."

Happy abruptly straightened up and opened her blind eyes wide. Her hand reached, groped once, clasped mine. "Rennie, I can see

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again! It's as if there's a new kind of light out here, something strange that we don't get on Earth. Didn't Hank say that gamma rays are stopped by the atmosphere?"

I nodded, felt stupid, and was amazed when she saw the motion.

"I think I'm seeing in the gamma ray range, darling. The little flashes that bring the sharp images just happen at random, but this 'different' sort of light is steady. It doesn't... bounce around, just goes straight from point to point. All the colors are gone, as though they've been leached away. But I can make out solid objects okay." She fell silent a moment, then added: "Rennie, there are messages on some of these rays too!"

The "docking" light blinked on at the head of the cabin, and the TV screen lighted up to show us approaching the Russo-American orbital station. When I recovered my composure Happy told me she couldn't see the TV screen, the warning signs, or any other visible light projection. But evidently there were enough gamma rays present to allow her to see solid objects quite well. When I asked about the messages, she wanted me to wait till later.

The docking was nothing but a gentle bump. We transferred through three airlocks to the station and on through another three into the lunar ferry. Floating in the air, and pulling yourself through corridors by grasping the covered rails that ran down the centers, was fun. We had watchful escorts all the way; tourists were not allowed to hurt themselves.

The ferry was just a big fat cylinder without grace or beauty, equipped with rocket nozzles that seemed small compared to its bulk. I suppose operating strictly in space meant it could get by on much smaller thrusters. Happy confided that her vision had dimmed while inside the thick-walled station. Evidently it shut out most of the higher frequencies bombarding us from space.

We were soon comfortably settled in our seats and enjoying the low gravity caused by a gradual acceleration. We were going to circle the Earth one and a half times, which seems odd for a trip to the Moon, but that was the way the tiny little engines on the ferry operated. The flight card illustration in the seat pocket ahead of us explained that we would increase our velocity gradually, until we were going fast enough to leave in a straight line for where the Moon would be in three days.

Unlike the shuttle, the ferry had small portholes for the passengers. Happy let me have the window seat; it was useless to her. I was trying to take in the magnificent view below

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us as we swept toward the night side, while also listening to Happy. She had her eyes closed again, her vision turned inward to what only she could see.

"I think there are at least three different — oh, kinds of people sending messages on the gamma rays and many separate series from each. I can *almost* separate them out, but... and the inner flashes are pretty regular now, one every few minutes. The steady rays have the better sound attached, though."

At that moment I saw a dim, tiny streak of flame somewhere deep in my right eye, something so brief and fragile it was gone the instant I could say it had been there. One of the free-flying cosmic protons had just exploded in the fovea of one eye, bringing its own destructive miniature illumination.

We entered the shadow of the Earth, and I became absorbed by the view below. Happy was quiet for the few minutes we were in the eclipse zone. I got the impression that the sights and sounds only she could sense had fallen off sharply.

I heard Happy gasp when we emerged into the sunlight again. I turned from the window and placed an arm around her shoulders. She snuggled into my chest and started talking rapidly, almost babbling, her voice strained: "There's a beautiful dancing form, in shimmering robes of fire... a volcano fairy with a heart of flame... dancing, singing... singing *hear me!*" There was rapture in her voice, a softening, a yielding to a peculiar and otherworldly possession. *"Oh, hear me, follow me!...* the hot embrace..." Her voice trailed off into silence.

I held and soothed and petted her, feeling deep in my bones, now that it was too late, that we should not have exposed her to these full-strength signals, that she was getting an information overload.

Happy suddenly pulled away. "Rennie! That was the big green frogman again. This was message number two. But there's interference... it's as if a TV set were playing behind both eyeballs, with two or three channels on each. *And I can't turn them off!*" She straightened, sitting rigidly erect in the seat, her body stiff and distant.

Happy experienced a momentary feeling of relief when we passed behind the Earth for the second time, but that was a short respite. I wanted desperately to get her out of there, back to the solid ground and its sheltering envelope of blessed air, but there was no way. Even if I could have convinced our pilot that Happy was sick unto death, he could not turn back now.

When we entered the sunlight a second time, Happy twisted around to look at me. "I'm not going to survive this, Rennie. I don't think anyone could and stay sane. Just

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don't blame yourself. This is what I wanted, and I still want it. If only I had a dozen cameras inside my skull, recording... but it's too much. There are so *many* of them out there, all trying to reach us..." She turned back to the front and began crooning to herself in a low monotone.

I put both hands on her shoulders, wanting to pull her out of it, close those too-receptive eyes, yank her away from the overload of data she was receiving. Instead I sat by her and listened to a soft babble that steadily grew more disconnected, more strange, but with occasional references that indicated she was getting later bits of several continuously broadcast messages. But there were far too many, and they jumbled and jammed together in her mind. She was terribly and overwhelmingly exposed to sights-sounds-impressions of such alienness and jarring unfamiliarity that attempting to decipher even one would have been a strain on an earthly genius.

I held and gently talked to Happy, trying to put her at ease with my familiar presence. And I think it helped. She held out for almost four hours, until just before the steward brought our first unspillable meal. I knew almost the instant that she edged over the brink, watched her face grow slack and vacant as she hurtled downward on the other side.

"Is something wrong?" the ruddy-faced young steward asked solicitously as he gripped the overhead rail and passed us our trays.

"Nothing you can help with," I assured him. He gave me a doubtful look but left to serve the other passengers.

The only remaining question was whether Happy's mind would return once we reached shelter. That one was answered three days later in the doctor's office, deep inside a lunar mountain. The thick rock walls did not help my beloved. Happy had stopped talking, could not see, and stumbled along behind me like an automaton as I dragged her through the rock tunnels. She had suffered severe overload of both her sensory and mental capacities. The doctor did not understand what had happened, and I did not try to enlighten him. But I knew from the false optimism he exuded like sweat that he saw little hope for her.

Somehow I got Happy back to Earth, on the ferry's return trip. I handled her like the baby she was, and there were no major problems. She still knew enough to go to the bathroom, when that was necessary. She still chewed and swallowed when food was placed in her mouth. But all her higher faculties seemed to have vanished, burned out by flames of knowledge through

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which no human before her had ever passed. The original Happy might be lurking somewhere deep inside, hiding among the shadows, but the state psychiatrist — I had no money left for a private sanitarium — assured me it was unlikely she would ever find her way out again.

But my lovely partner was only the first, I think. There was an item in the daily telefax yesterday. Two space pilots turned themselves into psychiatric care, claiming they had been subjected to unbearable "visions." It came out that a steward has already been committed for a similar breakdown. And three astronomers based on the Moon had to be returned recently for treatment.

Happy died eight months after our trip to the Moon.

We are not ready for space, perhaps. For a few years longer maybe we should hide behind our nice thick security blanket of air. Sometime in the future, when we are ready to translate the messages, we could go out again.

I'd like to see what Happy saw, if I could survive the experience. I think we all would.

(from Logic Puzzle, p. 160)

I. Goombah isn't the language of Boraxium (Par. C), or Asphaltium (Par. D), or Chloroformium (Par. H), or Excretium (clues 5, 10). GOOMBAH IS THE LANGUAGE OF THE MUMZER-SPENDERS OF DORMITORIUM (Par. F).

J. Ischwah isn't the lingo of Boraxium (Par. C), or Asphaltium (Par. D), or Chloroformium (Par. H), or Dormitorium (Par. I). ISCHWAH IS USED BY THE LAHNTZMUN-SPENDERS OF EXCRETIUM (Par. G).

RECAP:

STAR SYSTEM	LANGUAGE	MONETARY UNIT
ASPHALTIUM	HOOHAH	OY-VEIGHS
BORAXIUM	FLUSCHWAH	NAHRISCHKEITS
CHLOROFORMIUM	JOSCHWAH	KREPLACHS
DORMITORIUM	GOOMBAH	MUMZERS
EXCRETIUM	ISCHWAH	LAHNTZMUNS

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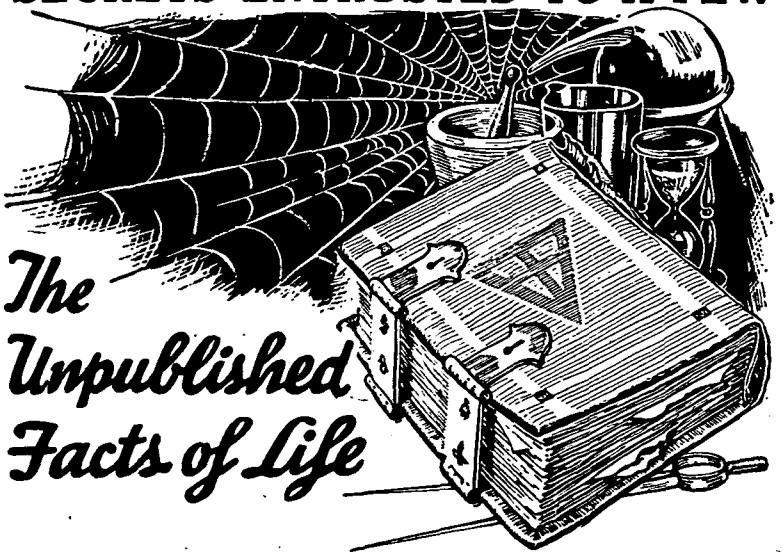

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LOGIC PUZZLE: LETTER FROM A SMALL BUSINESSMAN

by AL B. PERLMAN

INTERSTELLAR ROTEL AND ROCKET WASH, PLUTO

Dear Aunt Daphne and Uncle Vyachaslav:

Sorry about not writing to you sooner, but ever since taking over this business, I've really been quite busy. However, I've been out here a whole year now, so I figure I'm entitled to take a little time out from my many responsibilities in order to catch up on my correspondence with the folks back home. Seeing as how one of our Plutonian years is equal to almost 250 of your Earth years, you were probably beginning to wonder whether I'd *ever* get around to dropping you a line.

I find running a rotel very interesting as it brings me in contact with all sorts of travelers. Since Pluto is situated right at the gateway to the Solar System, just about all of the in-coming rockets make a stop here in order to refuel and to give the passengers a chance to stretch their tentacles and avail themselves of the comfort facilities. As you can well imagine, I play host to quite a diversified transient clientele.

It wasn't too long ago that the Solar System hardly attracted any visitors at all, but now it's one of the most "in" places in the whole Milky Way Galaxy, tourist-wise.

In the brief time since I've taken over the rotel, I've provided overnight accommodations to rocketsful of guests from five other star systems — ASPHALTIUM, BORAXIUM, CHLOROFORMIUM, DORMITORIUM and EXCRETIUM. What's more, to make them really feel at home, I took crash courses in all of their native lingos, which explains why I am now fluent in (not respectively) FLUSCHWAH, GOOMBAH, HOOHAH, ISCHWAH and JOSCHWAH. Another thing I had to learn in a hurry was the relative purchasing power of their monetary units which are (again, not respectively) the KREPLACH, the LAHNTZMUN, the MUMZER, the NAHRISCHKEIT and the OH-VEIGH. Like I said, it's been a an awfully busy year ... or, according to your way of figuring, an awfully busy 250 years.

Anyway, here are a few random tidbits of information so as you can figure out the language and monetary units of each of the five star systems:

1. Ischwah-speakers are asexual and reproduce by fission, while the highly-sophisticated repro-

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ductive process of the Kreplach-spenders requires the participation of all five sexes for conception. The inhabitants of Boraxium do their begetting in pretty much the same fashion as Earth people, whom they closely resemble, except that they never give birth to less than three offspring at a time.

2. Joschwah is quite easy to speak, but I've never learned to read it; whereas my communications with guests from Asphaltium are carried on entirely in writing. As for the four-legged, three-eyed Mumzer-spenders, the only practical means of communication is telepathy.

3. The day before our very first visitors from Excretium arrived, I was touched by the apparent financial plight of one young couple who, along with their two children, had been occupying one of our more modest rooms. Obviously, they were traveling on an extremely limited budget, and being somewhat of a softie in such matters, I reduced their bill by ten Oy-Veighs. I shall always treasure the very lovely note they gave me to express their gratitude.

4. I'll bet you didn't know there's an interstellar edition of F&SF. Naturally, it's limited in circulation to just one of the star systems, what with the language barrier and all. The way I happened to learn of it was after one of the guests called me on the house phone to ask for an extra blanket for his aging mother-in-law. I brought one up right away, and he was so darned appreciative that he gave me a couple of back issues that he'd brought along with him. They're fine publications, and I'm having a grand time reading them ... but I really think they have a hell of a nerve charging five Nahrischkeits per issue.

5. I don't like the Goombah-speakers much. We try awfully hard to make them comfortable, but they never show the slightest sign of appreciation.

6. The Fluschwah-speakers are much nicer, though they all seem to have an absolutely unlimited supply of funds. I'm also very fond of the visitors from Chloroformium who, though they're all relatively impoverished, are always so grateful for every little thing we do to help make them feel at home.

7. They say there's no such thing as being a little bit pregnant, but among the Lahntzmun-spenders there's no such thing as being pregnant at all.

8. The very first guests to stay at the Rotel were Kreplach-spenders, and soon after they left us we greeted our first visitors from Asphaltium. Their group leader was an obstetrician.

9. A pocketful of Kreplachs would be as worthless in Dormi-

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torium as fluency in Ischwah would be among the Mumzer-spenders.

10. The nice thing about visitors from Excretium is that they instantly adapt to any conditions and are absolutely no trouble at all.

SOLUTION

A. Since the family of Oy-Veigh-spenders described in Clue 3 communicated in writing, their language is not Joschwah (clue 2). Being a family, they would hardly be Ischwah-speakers (clues 1, 3). Their gratitude shows that they're definitely not Goombah-speakers (clues 3, 5), and their financial woes indicate that their language isn't Fluschwah (clues 3, 6). THUS, IN THE STAR SYSTEM WHERE OY-VEIGHS ARE THE COIN OF THE REALM, THE LANGUAGE IS HOOHAH.

B. The fellow who gave me the back issues of F&SF (Interstellar Edition) came from the star system where they deal in Nahrischkeits (clue 4). Since he has a mother-in-law, he could hardly be asexual, so he doesn't speak Ischwah (clues 1, 4). Seeing as I was able to read the publication, it wasn't printed in Joschwah (clues 2, 4), and his appreciation proves he was not a Goombah-speaker (clues 4, 5). Neither did he speak Hoohah (Par. A). NAHRISCHKEIT-SPENDERS, THEREFORE, COMMUNICATE IN FLUSCHWAH.

C. In Boraxium, the monetary system is not based on Kreplachs (clue 1), or Mumzers (clues 1, 2), or Lahntzmuns (clues 1, 7). Since the Oy-Veigh spenders in clue 3 had only two children, they're not from Boraxium either (clue 1). THE COINAGE OF BORAXIUM HAS TO BE NAHRISCHKEITS, THUS ESTABLISHING THE LANGUAGE AS FLUSCHWAH (Par. B).

D. Asphaltium's coinage isn't Mumzers (clue 2), or Nahrischkeits (Par. C), or Kreplachs (clue 8). The presence of the obstetrician precludes the possibility of the Lahntzmun (clues 7, 8). THE MONETARY UNIT OF ASPHALTIUM, THEREFORE, IS THE OY-VEIGH, AND THE LANGUAGE IS HOOHAH (Par. A).

E. Kreplachs aren't used in Boraxium (Par. C) or Asphaltium (Par. D). Since our first guests were not from Excretium (clue 3), Kreplachs aren't used there (clue 8), and neither are they of any worth in Dormitorium (clue 9). KREPLACHS ARE THE COINAGE OF CHLOROFORMIUM.

F. Mumzer-spenders don't communicate in Hoohah (Par. A), or Fluschwah (Par. B), or Joschwah (clue 2), or Ischwah (clue 9). HAGGLING OVER MUMZERS, THEREFORE, IS CARRIED ON IN GOOMBAH.

G. Ischwah-speakers don't deal in Oy-Veighs (Par. A), or Nahrischkeits (Par. B), or Goombah (Par. F), or Mumzers (clue 9). THE MONETARY SYSTEM OF THE ISCHWAH-SPEAKERS IS BASED ON THE LAHNTZMUN.

H. Kreplach-spenders don't communicate in Hoohah (Par. A), or Fluschwah (Par. B), or Goombah (Par. F), or Ischwah (Par. G). KREPLACHS ARE USED BY THE JOSCHWAH-SPEAKERS WHO LIVE IN CHLOROFORMIUM (Par. E).

(*continued on p. 156*)

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